

Drew University

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Tattoos in a Modern Context: Unique or Ubiquitous?

A Mixed-Methods Study to Provide Some Answers

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Abstract

Tattoos are becoming increasingly popular, especially among young adults. Despite this, there remains a connection in both the academic literature and popular perception between tattoos and deviance. Additionally, there is a lack of current research that takes a qualitative, holistic approach to understanding the perceptions, motivations, and meanings surrounding tattoos in samples other than niche sub-cultures. Successful, non-deviant young adults, such as college students, provide the opportunity to question this connection between tattoos and deviance, as many sport tattoos and yet will be entering into traditionally conservative work environments. The present study employs a mixed methods design to provide current information on the prevalence of tattoos in a college sample, answer questions related to employment concerns, and explore the motivations, meanings, and gender expressions that tattoos can embody. Results illustrate the complex nature of tattoo meanings, in which several motivations may be filled by one tattoo. Additionally, results indicate that most college students are largely unconcerned about employment discrimination based on tattoos, managing any concern through avoiding tattoos or choosing tattoos in inconspicuous locations. Results also assess non-tattooed participants' perspectives on tattoos, which were largely positive, though at times dependent on the nature of the tattoo. Directions for further study are explored relating both to college students and other populations of interest.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Studying Tattoos - From Initial Interest to the Present Study.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	4
History of Tattoos and Tattoo Research.....	4
Tattoos in College Students and the Workplace.....	7
Common Reasons for Obtaining Tattoos.....	8
Gender and Tattooing Practices.....	10
The Present Study	12
Chapter 3: Methods	15
Participants.....	15
Materials.....	15
Procedure.....	17
Chapter 4: Results	18
Tattoo Decision Process.....	18
Reasons for Not Becoming Tattooed.....	18
Perspectives on Employment.....	19
Gendered Nature of Tattoos	20
Family/Relational Tattoos.....	23
Affect Management.....	25
Role Transition.....	27
Nostalgic Tattoos.....	29
Marking Individual Differences.....	30
Value Tattoos.....	32

Non-tattooed Perspectives on Others' Tattoos	32
Chapter 4: Discussion and Future Implications.....	36
References.....	43
Tables.....	46
Appendices.....	48

Chapter 1: Studying Tattoos - From Initial Interest to the Present Study

“Know first who you are, then adorn yourself accordingly”

- Epictetus

In a world where we are overcome with variety and choices, our bodies are increasingly the site of decisions about how we represent both our group and individual identities. From clothing and beauty products to body modifications, such as hair-styles, physical physique, and piercings, each of us makes numerous decisions about our presentation to the outside world. Along with plastic surgery, tattooing is perhaps the most permanent body modification that one can make, and tattoos appear to be becoming both more adopted and more accepted in contemporary Western societies.

I became interested in studying tattoos through casual conversations with my research mentor, through heuristic observations about tattoos in my peer group and social circles, and because I am a tattooed person myself. It seemed that there was a disparity between the prevalence and acceptance of tattoos, especially among young adults, and the broader narrative of deviance and stigma surrounding tattoos. While many of my peers and even a number of professors are tattooed, there is still discourse about tattoos being related to criminality, drugs, and increased risky sexual behaviors, and that tattoos are unprofessional and likely to result in problems for individuals entering professional settings.

I was fascinated by the tension between the perception of tattooed individuals as unprofessional or deviant and the growing frequency of tattoos in the general population, or even in a specific, hireable population, like college students. I became interested in researching the current state of tattoo adoption and perception, wanting to understand the apparent disparity between the popularity of tattoos among college students and young adults and the remaining workplace stigma surrounding tattoos. I considered a number of questions: Was this stigma

perceived by college students preparing to enter the workforce? How do tattooed college students navigate their desire for individual expression through body modification and the desire to join more traditional work environments? Also, to what degree is tattooing a gendered practice, by observers and practitioners? Do people make tattoo decisions differently based on gender, and can we see that in their narratives around the tattoo experience?

As I began my preliminary research, I maintained my interest in these questions while also noting the lack of current research investigating the meanings and motivations behind tattoo behaviors. I adopted a broad approach in this project and chose to employ both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to allow for themes to emerge from the data and in the hopes of painting a more multifaceted picture of tattooing than is often portrayed in the research. What follows is not an exhaustive report of tattooing practices and perceptions in all young adult populations; rather, it is an exploratory investigation into a specific group of college students which seeks to demonstrate the ways in which mixed methodology can be used to gain a more complex and holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon, such as tattooing.

In this thesis, I give a brief summary of the history of tattoos and the academic research concerning this form of body modification. This discussion highlights both the venerable nature of tattooing as a practice and the way in which tattoos have shifted in and out of public favor over time. I also highlight the way that tattoos have historically been pathologized in both Western culture and academic literature, with researchers treating tattoos as a practice adopted by deviant populations rather than an ancient tradition adopted by a multitude of people for a multitude of reasons. Following this background information, I describe some of the modern psychological research on tattoos, including recent findings and areas that would benefit from further research. This literature review emphasizes the prevalence of tattoos among people from

diverse backgrounds and the fact that no clear relationship between tattooing practices and personality traits, including deviant traits, has emerged.

Next, I discuss the perception of tattoos in the workplace and tattooing practices in college populations, arguing that these populations are of unique interest to research given the intersection of their age and their employability. I then explore some of the common reasons for obtaining tattoos, which serve as a framework for the present analysis. Additionally, I discuss the possible ways in which gender may be expressed through tattoos.

After outlining the literature concerning tattoos from both a historic and contemporary standpoint, I end my introduction by outlining the present study. I provide a brief explanation of my primary questions of interest in conducting this research and a reiteration of the gaps that exist in the available literature.

The second chapter of this thesis provides an in-depth description of the methods used in this research, including the measures and procedure used in service of answering questions concerning tattooing behaviors and perceptions among college students. The third chapter presents the results from this research, and explores the themes from the data, including those hypothesized based on the literature review and those which emerged in the course of analysis. I conclude this thesis by placing the results in the broader context of tattoo research, discussing the limitations of the present research and highlighting implications for future study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Tattoos and Tattoo Research

Tattooing is the practice of injecting skin with pigment particles to create an indelible mark on the body. This practice dates back to antiquity, with indigenous peoples on every continent other than Antarctica creating tattoos (Deter-Wolf, Robitaille, Krutak, & Galliot, 2016). Tattooing is widely believed to predate most writing systems, though the exact age of this practice, both globally and regionally, has been the subject of academic debate. Currently, the oldest recognized tattoo was discovered on the mummified remains of a Tyrolean Iceman who is thought to have died approximately 3250 B.C.E. (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016). Tattoos served a variety of roles in ancient cultures, from marking slaves and criminals to distinguishing warriors, commemorating voyages and even possibly as a healing practice (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016; Deter-Wolf, 2013).

Despite the long history of tattooing in many parts of the globe, tattoos are often considered to be a new phenomenon, particularly in Western European culture (Deter-Wolf, 2013). The “introduction” of tattoos to the Western world is accredited to Captain James Cook, who visited the Pacific Islands in the late eighteenth century and returned with personal tattoos as well as with a number of tattooed indigenous people (Burgess & Clark, 2010). Through Cook and his travels, tattoos spread across the contemporary Western World and more people became exposed to tattoos and began adopting them (Burgess & Clark, 2010). For years, tattoos were adopted from native peoples by Westerners who were considered lower-class, such as sailors, manual laborers, and gang members. As a result, tattoos have historically been seen as marks of criminality (Lane, 2014).

Echoing the popular view of tattoos and their historical association with criminality and “less advanced” societies, much of the early research concerning tattoos came from the field of clinical psychology. This research focused either on tattoos’ relationship to deviancy and negative personality traits and behaviors or on the significance of tattooing in Non-Western societies (Burgess & Clark, 2010; Kosut, 2000). Researchers considered tattoos a viable option for diagnosing pathological behavior and most research on tattooed individuals stressed the presence of dysfunctional personality traits or inherent character flaws (Grumet, 1983; Lane, 2014). These associations are illustrated by explorations of an underlying deviance to explain both the tattoos and criminality in criminal tattooed populations, by the use of tattoos as a proxy for self-harm in the literature, and by the conceptualization of tattooing as a means for repairing or sustaining a disturbed ego (Lane, 2014).

Beginning as early as the 1950s, some of the psychological research into tattoos began to shift away from themes of deviance, though the connection to pathology and maladaptive behaviors remains a prominent sub-area of the research even today (Dukes, 2016; Lane, 2014). The less pathology-focused research generally concentrates on themes of tattoo perception, both by tattooed people themselves and by the general population (Lane, 2014). There is relatively little research examining the etiology of tattoos and meanings ascribed to body projects, and much of the available literature in this area focuses on relatively small niche populations, generally sampled from a single tattoo shop representing a unique subculture (Atkinson, 2002; Kosut, 2000). These studies have resulted in some useful categories to consider when attempting to understand tattoo meanings and motivations, which will be discussed later, but there is generally little connection made between the findings and the larger culture or trajectory of tattooing as a practice. Similarly, though the research concerning tattoo perception generally

reports how those with tattoos are perceived compared to non-tattooed individuals, it does not investigate the beliefs underlying these perceptions (Lane, 2014).

Although much of the modern research on tattoos does not paint a complex picture of tattooing behavior or motivation, there have been a number of important findings, which are outlined here. Much recent research has been motivated by the fact that the number of people with tattoos has been steadily growing in recent decades (Dickson et al., 2015; Dundes and Francis, 2017; Lane, 2014). In the last three years, estimates of tattoo prevalence in young American adults have risen from 30% to 47% (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Dickson et al., 2015). Current research suggests that most people get tattoos as a form of body art or expression of individuality and not as a form of rebellion or marking a deviant identity (Dickson, Dukes, Smith & Strapko, 2015). For example, data from college-aged individuals suggest that those with and without tattoos are similar in a variety of demographic categories, though slightly more females obtain tattoos and those with tattoos tend to be less religious (Pentina & Spears, 2011). In the general public, those with and without tattoos do not appear to differ significantly on measures of personality traits such as agreeableness and sensation-seeking (Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011). Most tattoos are obtained to mark individuality rather than group membership, suggesting that the stereotypical connection between tattoos and gangs may be inaccurate in the present day (Simpson & Pullen, 2018).

In addition to exploring possible trait differences of those with and without tattoos, modern research has explored the tattooing process. Most people get their tattoos in official studios and do not become tattooed while intoxicated (Dickson et al., 2015). Similarly, the majority of young adults do not impulsively become tattooed, planning for a significant amount of time before getting their first tattoo (Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011). Additionally,

contemporary research suggests that the majority of college students have positive attitudes regarding tattoos, do not see tattoos as a symbol of rebellion or risk taking, and do not report concern that they will be seen as risk-takers if they become tattooed (Dickson et al., 2015).

Tattoos in College Students and the Workplace

While tattooing has become a more prominent practice in recent years and people with tattoos come from a wide variety of racial, socio-economic, and gender categories, tattoos are still less accepted among older individuals, especially those with higher income and education levels (Dickson et al., 2015). Research suggests that tattoos may still affect perception of individuals in a workplace environment; with tattooed individuals being viewed as less professional and less qualified than their non-tattooed counterparts (Simpson & Pullen, 2018). Interviewers tend to give applicants with more traditionally professional appearances higher ratings post-interview than those who have visible body modifications, such as tattoos or non-ear piercings. Moreover, people with tattoos, piercings, and other body modification are not protected from workplace discrimination on the basis of these modifications under United States' law (Ellis, 2015). Because of this, individuals must consider the possible employment consequences when making the decision to become tattooed and the subsequent decisions on the size and placement of any tattoos.

College students are a unique group to study with regard to tattoos and employability as they are entering the workforce with more credentials and better opportunities than others in the same age group; however, they are also more likely to be tattooed than older college graduates, who may be their future co-workers and employees. Additionally, they differ significantly from the stereotypical consumers of tattoos, which include groups such as criminals and members of gangs (Dickson et al., 2015). With the disparity between the growing acceptance and popularity

of tattoos and the remaining workplace stigma, an increasing number of college students must navigate their social situations and make decisions as to whether or not to become tattooed and as to the placement and number of tattoos they obtain. Another reason for studying college students is the fact that much of the present literature on tattoos focuses either on adolescents, for whom tattoos are still correlated with deviance and negative outcomes, and older adults, who may have more conservative views of tattoos and who may have more working-class jobs, if tattooed (Lane, 2014). Because of their tattoo prevalence and increased employment credentials, college students and recent graduates may help current employers come to terms with the popularity of tattoos among their prospective employees.

Common Reasons for Obtaining Tattoos

Motivations behind obtaining a tattoo are as diverse as the people who obtain tattoos and the images that they choose. When considering a topic as broad as tattooing behavior, it can be helpful to create categories of common tattoo motivations. Various researchers have attempted to categorize tattoo motivations, many of which center around themes of group membership and identity (Dickson et al., 2015).

Reasons for obtaining tattoos can vary from marking oneself as unique to commemorating a loved one or a specific occasion. In his sociological research concerning tattoo adoption in Canadian populations, Atkinson (2003) developed three categories to describe individuals' reasons for obtaining tattoos. These categories are role transition, affect management, and marking individual differences. The role transition category includes tattoos that mark a period of transition or the culmination of an event in an individual's life. Role transitions can be understood as distinct events, such as graduations, marriages, or vacations, or longer processes of transition, such as overcoming illness or adversity, working towards a goal,

or leaving a situation (Atkinson, 2003). The prevalence of tattoos among college students may be explained, in part, by the large amount of change individuals' experience during this time in life regarding independence, living situations, and aspirations.

Tattoos may also serve as a form of affect management, which may be a form of role transition or its own separate motivation for tattooing. Affect management is viewed as a normative way of dealing with loss, such as the death of a loved one (Atkinson, 2003). Getting a tattoo may serve as affect management in two ways: the tattoo can become a personal memorial for the deceased, and the pain of getting tattooed may be a cathartic way of feeling negative emotions (Atkinson, 2003). Affect management tattoos often consist of images which are representative of a lost loved one, such as a birth or death date or an image related to that person, such as their favourite flower or symbol. Affect management tattoos may also serve as healing for an individual's personal pain, such as overcoming sexual assault, mental illness, or another personal loss not related to a deceased relation.

Atkinson's (2003) third category of tattoo motivations, marking individual differences, broadly encompasses tattoos chosen based on personal preference. While many get tattoos for the above mentioned reasons or for other ideologically motivated reasons, a large number of others get tattoos based on aesthetic sensibility or personal preference, essentially "just because" (Dickson et al., 2015). In this type of tattoo, individuals choose symbols from their social world to express themselves as individuals through an aesthetic medium (Dickson et al., 2015). Individual difference tattoos may still be important to the individual's sense of self, such as an image with which they have identified for the majority of their life, but they are not as specifically tied to a goal, such as marking transition or providing an emotional outlet, as tattoos which fall into the previous two categories. Despite the prevalence of these preference-related

tattoos, individuals are often encouraged to develop their own personal meanings for the words or symbols they choose for their tattoos, and therefore they may form a narrative after the fact of obtaining a tattoo which aligns more closely with one of the other motivation categories (Atkinson, 2003; Dickson et al., 2015; Madfis & Arford, 2013). Additionally, research suggests that individuals who do not construct meaningful narratives around their tattoos may eventually regret their tattoo decisions, as they are often asked about the story behind their tattoos and begin to feel that the decision was made rashly (Atkinson, 2003; Madfis & Arford, 2013).

Another useful category when considering tattoo motivations was proposed by Pentina and Spears (2011). In this category, self-protection and self-assertion are motives for obtaining a tattoo in which the individual stabilizes and asserts their identity through marking the body with a permanent identity-related symbol. These tattoos are often used as reminders of an emotion or core value for the individual. The symbol may serve to remind the tattooed person of a difficult situation and the strength that it took to overcome strife. These permanent reminders serve as “identity stabilizers” and help the individual to act in congruence with their desired values across multiple situations (Pentina & Spears, 2011). Tattoos serving this purpose may also fall into the categories of role-transition or affect management, particularly if they serve the purpose of commemorating perseverance through strife. However, these tattoos may also represent values which are not inherently tied to transition or grief, such as curiosity or kindness.

Gender in Tattooing Practices

Each of us constantly expresses gender through our mode of dress, mannerisms, and chosen activities. In the field of women’s and gender studies, gender has been conceptualized not as a predetermined category, but as something that is constantly constructed and performed by every individual in society (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). As such, it is important to consider the role

that tattoos play in the performance of gender, either through enforcing or contradicting stereotypical gender norms.

Several recent studies report a higher prevalence of tattoos among women than men (Dickson et al., 2015; Hill, Ogletree, McCrary, 2016; Pentina, & Spears, 2011). Despite this, tattooing has been more taboo for women than for men, both historically and in modern times (Atkinson, 2002; Lane, 2014). The groups of Westerners who became tattooed after Cook's reintroduction of tattoos to Western society were predominantly male and for some time relatively few women became tattooed outside of niche groups, such as circus performers (Burgess & Clark, 2010; Lane, 2014). While the popularity of tattoos among women has greatly increased in recent years, women are still likely to have fewer tattoos than men and generally have less visible tattoos (Dickson et al., 2015). Women are more likely to have tattoos in private or sexualized areas such as on the hips or the side of the breast, whereas men's choice of tattoo location is typically more public, in places such as the forearm, upper-arm, or calf (Dickson et al., 2015; Laumann & Derick, 2006). Similarly, traditional gender roles are often enforced through tattoos, with men choosing stereotypically masculine images such as skulls and swords and women choosing stereotypically feminine images and designs such as flowers or birds. Men tend to have larger tattoos than women and tattoo size correlates positively with tattoo satisfaction for men but not for women (Dickson et al., 2015). The literature suggests that men are more likely to get tattoos which express group affiliation such as support of a sports team or military branch, whereas women are more likely to choose tattoos which express their individuality (Dickson et al., 2015).

Gender may also be expressed in terms of how tattooed individuals are perceived. Much of this research focuses on views towards women, which may be a result of the relative recency

of female tattooing as a common practice or because men tend to value physical appearance more than women when choosing partners (Guéguen, 2013). Additionally, although all tattooed individuals have faced historic discrimination, tattooed women were seen as especially deviant and attempts were made to stop women in particular from obtaining tattoos (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). Tattooed women were judged to be less attractive, sociable, and professionally competent than women without tattoos (Guéguen, 2013). In addition to these perceptions, women with tattoos were perceived by men as more likely to accept sexual advances although they were not viewed as more physically attractive (Guéguen, 2013). Hawkes et al. (2004) suggest that perceptions of women with tattoos may be particularly harsh due to classic gender norms and views of deviant women, as obtaining tattoos may be seen as deviating from gender norms due to the historically male dominated nature of tattoo consumption. Furthermore, women are often judged more harshly than men for non-conformity, likely due to the societal expectation for men to be free-thinking and outspoken (Hawkes et al., 2004). This may contribute to women's choices of tattoos which are placed in private and sexualized areas and generally conform to ideas of femininity (e.g. smaller tattoos with images such as flowers and hearts).

The Present Study

The available literature on tattooing behavior and decisions covers topics ranging from historical prevalence to current motivations behind tattooing and views of tattooed individuals. Despite the wealth of research on tattoos at large, a relatively small subset of the literature focuses specifically on college aged individuals and the prevalence and motivations behind their body modifications. Tattoos are becoming increasingly popular and research has sought to capture the demographics and broad personality traits of tattooed and non-tattooed individuals,

yet relatively little is known about the actual process of making tattoo decisions or the narratives constructed by modern tattoo recipients.

It is important to study tattooing practices and perceptions among college students for a number of reasons. Firstly, studying a population of young adults allows us to gain information on current views and practices and may provide insight into trends regarding the prevalence and acceptance of tattoos. Additionally, college educated individuals are distinct from the traditionally working class tattooed populations, as they are more educated and more likely to attain higher paying jobs. Lastly, these individuals must consider the views of family members and future employers, many of whom may be less accepting of tattoos, when determining whether and where to place a tattoo.

The present study was designed with consideration for these deficits in the literature on tattoos. Instead of collecting data with a narrow hypothesis or research question in mind, I sought to gain a broader understanding of tattoos in today's college students, and to consider the potentially gendered nature of tattoos, in perception and practice. I was interested in the prevalence of tattoos among college students and their social circles as well as in the degree to which they are concerned about employment discrimination based on tattoos. For those without tattoos, I hoped to gain insight into the factors which influenced their abstinence from this type of body modification, including concerns such as employment, family judgement, and the cost of tattoos. I was also curious as to how many non-tattooed students were interested in obtaining tattoos in the future. For students with tattoos, I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of their motivations behind becoming tattooed as well as of the meanings they ascribed to their tattoos. As such, I asked concrete questions related to how long they planned their tattoo and how any tattoos they had, and encouraged open-ended discussion of the story behind their chosen

tattoo(s). Through this discussion, I hoped to answer questions related to the role that tattoos serve for college students in terms of solidifying relationships, commemorating transition, confirming or subverting gender norms, and marking individual differences.

Chapter 3: Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through word of mouth and through flyers advertising the survey both at the home institution and on Facebook. Additionally, faculty from three nearby institutions were asked to share the flyers and information about the survey with their students. A subset of participants was recruited through the introduction to psychology subject pool, in which students are asked to participate in research studies as one of the course requirements ($n=57$, 30.3%). The survey received 294 respondents, but data were removed for participants who did not complete the entire survey. The final study sample consisted of 196 university students (50 male, 142 female, 4 other). Participants were between 18 and 52 years old ($M = 20.23$, $SD = 3.01$). The majority of participants (94%) attended the home university, with only 6% attending other institutions. The demographic breakdown for this sample was similar to the home institution in terms of gender and comparable in terms of ethnic/racial breakdown. The sample was predominantly White (77%, $n = 158$; For a full frequency table of participants' ethnicity, see Table 1.) Socioeconomic status was assessed through the parents' highest education level (as set forth by Aarø et al., 2009). The sample was largely affluent, with 42.9% of students reporting parents with a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree (For a full frequency table of parental education, see Table 2.). In the present sample, the majority of individuals were non-tattooed ($n=138$, 70.4%).

Measures

Demographics. All participants answered a variety of demographic questions including items related to their age, gender, major, attended institution, participation in an honors program, and enrollment in an introductory psychology course. Additionally, participants were provided

with a comment box and encouraged to leave any questions, comments, or concerns for the researchers.

Tattoos in social and professional life. Two items assessed the prevalence of tattoos in the participant's social life. One of these items asked participants to estimate the number of their friends who were tattooed, with options ranging from none to all. The second item asked participants to indicate all members of their immediate family who had a tattoo. Employment concerns were assessed with a single item; participants were asked to mark a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from disagree to agree, regarding their belief that tattoos make it more difficult to obtain a job after graduation. A final item for all participants assessed whether or not they had at least one tattoo.

Viewpoints of non-tattooed participants. If the participants did not have a tattoo, they were directed to items regarding their decision not to get tattooed and regarding any planned tattoos. The first item in this section asked participants if they were planning on obtaining a tattoo in the future; response options ranged from definitely no to definitely yes. Two items assessed the participant's decision not to become tattooed. The first offered seven common reasons for not becoming, including an "other" option, and allowed participants to select as many options as applied to them. The second item was open ended, allowing participants to write a more in-depth description of their reasons for not becoming tattooed and to describe how heavily each factor weighed into this decision. A final item invited participants to discuss any plans that they might have for future tattoos, asking them to describe any prospective designs including the meaning behind the symbol(s).

Experiences of tattooed participants. If the participant had a tattoo, they were directed to a number of items specifically related to their tattoo(s). The majority of questions regarding

tattoos focused on the first tattoo as many college-aged tattooed individuals have only one tattoo and because the initial decision to become tattooed is the one which marks the individual as tattooed or not, whereas later tattoo decisions only change the amount of skin covered by ink.

One item assessed the number of tattoos for each participant. Another item assessed the age at which the participant obtained their first tattoo. A third item assessed the degree of forethought that went into the tattoo, asking participants to estimate the amount of time they planned before getting their first tattoo; options ranged from less than 48 hours to a year or more. An additional ten-point Likert scale item assessed participants concerns about attaining a job after graduation as a result of their own tattoos. In a text box, participants were asked to describe in as much detail possible the design of their first tattoo. Following this, they were asked to describe the meaning behind this first tattoo including its symbolism. Participants were then asked to indicate the likelihood that they would obtain additional tattoos in the future, with options ranging from definitely not to definitely yes. Tattooed participants filled out a final text box which invited them to describe the design and meaning behind any other tattoos they had or planned to obtain.

Procedure

Participants completed all measures online through the survey software website Qualtrics. All items in this survey were approved by the institutional review board and all participants read and signed an electronic consent form before participating in the study. For a list of all materials, see appendices below. Upon completion of the survey, all participants were thoroughly debriefed and provided with contact information for the researcher and for the head of the institutional review board.

Chapter 4: Results

Analyses

Data were qualitatively analyzed for all open-ended items in the survey. The goal of this analysis was to better understand motivations for obtaining or not obtaining tattoos as well as the types of images chosen by college students. Analyses were conducted on individuals' first tattoos as well as on any planned or additional tattoos discussed in significant detail. This included individuals who described their later tattoos as well as those who did not currently have any tattoos but had a clear image in mind for a future body project. As such, many participants' data were coded with multiple different labels, whether resulting from a single tattoo or multiple tattoos.

Grounded theory method was used and as such data were analyzed and grouped into categories as themes emerged. Additionally, the data were read with Atkinson's (2003) three categories of body project motivation and with Pentina and Spears' (2011) notion of self-enforcing motivations in mind. Atkinson's (2003) categories are labeled as role transitions, affect management, and marking individual differences; Pentina and Spears' category is labeled as "value tattoos". Data were coded into these four categories and also marked for any other themes that emerged over the course of analysis. All qualitative responses were read and analyzed, even past the point of thematic redundancy, where no new categories or themes were emerging from the data. In addition to the themes of affect management, role transition, marking individual differences, and value tattoos, other emergent themes included nostalgia, identity, and family/relational tattoos; these will be discussed below.

Tattoo Decision Process

Although information was collected on gender, ethnicity, honors program participation, and other demographics, the sample sizes were small enough that data were combined except when otherwise specified. Of those with tattoos, the largest portion waited a year or more before acting upon their desire to obtain a tattoo ($n=23$, 39.7%), followed by those who waited between one and six months ($n=15$, 29.5%), an equal number of those who waited either less than a month or less than 48 hours ($n=7$, 12.1%), and those who waited between 6 months and 1 year before obtaining a tattoo ($n=6$, 10.3%). The mean age at which individuals became tattooed was 18.47 ($SD = 1.54$). Participants' number of tattoos ranged from 1 to 20 ($M=2.1$, $SD = 1.39$), with the largest group of students having only one tattoo ($n = 24$, 46%).

Reasons for Not Becoming Tattooed

Among non-tattooed participants, the most common of multiple reasons selected for not obtaining a tattoo was a fear that they would regret it ($n = 67$, 48.6%), followed by an uncertainty as to what image to choose ($n=60$, 43.5%), and thirdly that they were afraid about what their families might think ($n= 49$, 35.5%; For a frequency table of all reasons, see Table 3.). When asked if they planned on getting tattoos in the future, the most common response was “probably not” ($n = 37$, 26.8%), followed by “might or might not” ($n = 32$, 23.2%), and then “definitely not” ($n = 31$, 22.5%).

Perspectives on Employment

In the entire sample, students typically answered neutrally to the item asking participants to what extent they agreed with the statement “I think students with visible tattoos will have a harder time finding a job after graduation” ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 2.317$). However, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether differences existed between tattooed and non-tattooed participants. Results were significant, with tattooed individuals agreeing with the

statement less ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 2.17$) than their non-tattooed counterparts ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.34$), $t(192) = 2.44$, $p = .016$. The effect size for this analysis ($d = .39$) was medium. Tattooed individuals responded to an additional item, which asked them to what degree they felt worried about their ability to obtain a job upon graduation based on their own tattoos. The majority of students did not agree with this statement ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 1.42$).

Kosut (2000) speaks of the importance of placement the tattoo decision and notes that choosing a non-visible or coverable location allows the tattooed individual to choose who will view the tattoo and be privy to the information it provides about the individual's identity. In qualitative analysis, participants' responses were coded for hideability if they specifically mentioned being able to hide their tattoos or choosing a hideable location for their tattoos in their written responses. Eighteen of 58 tattooed participants specifically mentioned choosing a location for their tattoo where it would not be visible in the workplace or during an interview. This finding may speak to participants' lack of concern that their own tattoos would affect employability, as a hidden tattoo is unlikely to result in workplace discrimination.

Gendered Nature of Tattoos

All tattoos reported by participants were analyzed for the perceived gendered nature of the tattoo. The data were stripped of demographic information before analysis, preventing prior knowledge of participants' gender from affecting the coder's assessment as to whether the tattoo was gender-consistent or gender-nonconforming. For example, if one knows a participant is male, they may be less likely to perceive his tattoo as feminine, regardless of the tattoo placement or design. The perception of gender in tattoos can come from a variety of different sources and, as such, gender was broken down into three different categories: size/placement of tattoo, tattoo image, and wording used to describe the tattoo or planned tattoo.

The last category was formed inductively as we discussed how to code tattoo based on gender; one of the researchers noted that she assumed the tattoo owner was female because of the wording used to describe the tattoo: “I think that’s a really cute place to get a tattoo” (Evelyn, female, 20 years old). I then decided that the language used to describe one’s tattoo could be an indicator of how one conceptualizes their tattoo and of how strictly one conforms to stereotypically masculine or feminine gender roles.

Coding tattoos for gender was a challenging process as perception of a tattoo as gendered is inherently subjective and somewhat ineffable. Certain tattoos read as extremely stereotypical of one gender, and yet upon a frank analysis it is difficult to express why this is. “It is an Infinity symbol with the word believe written in cursive attached to the Infinity symbol. There are [three] birds flying away from the infinity symbol that are all in different stages of flight”(“Brenna”, female, 20 years old); this description of a participant’s tattoo was agreed upon to be very feminine, mostly because we had anecdotally seen many women with such tattoos, but it was difficult to express why exactly this was a feminine tattoo; there is nothing inherently female about birds or the infinity symbol or even in the concept of believing, yet this design read as decidedly feminine. I then decided that I would code the tattoos based on gender with the knowledge that these codings, much like the concept of gender roles themselves, were inherently subjective. When a question as to the validity of the coding arose, I brought the data in question to one or more additional members of my research team and the issue was discussed until a consensus was reached regarding the gendered nature of the tattoo or its description. During analysis of wording, it became apparent that it was much easier to label wording as female than male, with female descriptions being typified by use of expressive words and descriptions such as “cute” or “delicate”. Masculine wording was found much less in the data, and wording was

only usually coded as male based on anatomical descriptions, such as describing a “pec” instead of a breast. This highlights the way in which masculinity is viewed as the standard in our society, marking femininity as atypical, both linguistically and visually.

Most participants did not explicitly speak about gender or gender concerns when discussing their tattoos or decision to remain non-tattooed. However, one participant did express concern that having a tattoo would negatively impact male’s perceptions of her.

“[M]ales find women like myself less attractive with tattoos as its considered more masculine. Not to mention that males, in general, may respect me less or take me even less seriously when I already have a hard enough time being heard and respected as a 'minority' female” (“Wendy”, female, 21 years old).

Although this is only one example, it is illustrative of the way in which one’s gender may play a role in choosing whether or not to become tattooed rather than simply affecting later decisions of image, size, and placement. Similarly, one non-tattooed participant brought up gender in her discussion of tattoos,

“I do not like the look of sleeve tattoos on women. It is not easy to cover and it looks too masculine” (“Felicity”, female, 18 years old).

This speaks to findings from the literature on gender and tattoos, which suggest that women may be perceived more negatively than men based on their tattooed status (Guéguen, 2013; Hawkes et al., 2004). It also suggests that women may be more strictly policed than men on the type of tattoos they choose to adopt, as certain tattoos may not align with traditional concepts of femininity, based on symbol, size, or location. The first quote also suggests that gender and race may intersect when concerning tattoo decisions, such that those with multiple minority identities have more to consider before deciding whether or not to become tattooed. Given that the present

study did not have any items prompting individuals to think about their gender in relation to tattoos, additional study would be warranted. It is possible that participants of all genders would be able to articulate the way in which their identity or other's perception of their gender affected their tattoo decisions, if directly prompted.

Family/Relational Tattoos

An emergent theme in the qualitative data was that of family or relational tattoos. Many individuals chose to get tattoos with friends or family member or to honour their relationships with such individuals, whether alive or deceased. Tattoos which represent relationships with deceased people also fall under the category of affect management, and were coded under both labels. Similarly, many relational tattoos could be conceptualized as role transition tattoos, yet enough participants spoke about getting a tattoo specifically to mark a relationship that it was deemed a unique category. An example of this type of tattoo from our sample is a Celtic knot representing the mother-daughter relationship, which the participant and her mother obtained together.

“The Celtic mother-daughter knot not only symbolizes a bond between mother and daughter but it also resembles a trinity knot. My mother and I both wanted a trinity knot tattoo as a reminder to strive for balance between mind, body, and spirit so when we found the mother-daughter knot, we decided to get matching tattoos because they held so much meaning for us” (“Meg”, female, 21 years old).

Another participant got a similar Celtic mother-daughter knot and described the meaning thusly:

“I got this with my mom on my 19th birthday, when my family went to California [on] a family trip. It was my mom's first tattoo and she promised we would get it together as my birthday present. My mom has always been my best friend and biggest supporter, so it

meant a lot to know that we now have a piece of each other that will always be there. It is about three inches and in blue ink, since that was my grandmother's favorite color, and we wanted to include her memory in the tattoo as well” (“Alison”, female, 19 years old).

These descriptions illustrate how tattoos can hold multiple meanings for an individual and how the very act of getting tattooed can become part of that meaning. The tattoo serves as a reminder of the strength of the mother-daughter relationship, but the very act of getting the tattoo together likely strengthened the relationship further and left both the participant and her mother with a lasting memory. Additionally, the second mother-daughter pair chose a color in honour of the participant’s grandmother, serving as a memorial affect management tattoo and perhaps marking the importance of the matrilineal connection in this family. This participant also had a number of other tattoos, most of which were connected to her Irish/Celtic heritage in some way, and so this and the other tattoos serve as a reinforcement and depiction of this identity.

Knowledge of the specific circumstances under which someone became tattooed can aid understanding of the tattoo’s significance. Not only the act of becoming simultaneously tattooed, but the context in which they were tattooed may serve to strengthen participants’ relationships. In this manner, a tattoo may fall under both relational and role transition labels as the tattoo serves to strengthen or honour the relationship as well as to mark a specific occasion. For example, a number of participants described getting tattoos with family or friends on specific occasions, such as on a birthday or a vacation. Additionally, one participant described the way in which she and a friend chose their tattoo design and how she actually tattooed them both,

“We surfed Pinterest and found this image and I tattooed it on both of us. It took less than [two] hours to pick and by the end of the night we were bonded together forever” (“Arya”, female, 22 years old).

By tattooing herself and her friend, it seems that the act of tattooing became more significant than it might have if the tattoos were obtained in a professional tattoo studio.

When getting a tattoo with a friend or family member, the majority of participants reported getting the same exact image, although a subset of participants obtained related images. For example, one participant explained how she and her brothers each had a sun tattoo in a slightly different style or location and how “All of our [suns] are different but we still have the connection of having our own suns” (“Chelsea”, female, 21 years old). In this way, individuality is being expressed while still highlighting the relationship between siblings. Additionally, a subset of individuals without tattoos stated that they were waiting to get a tattoo until a relative, typically a sibling, became old enough to get a tattoo with them. Other participants chose to obtain tattoos which honour a relationship with a living person but did not get a shared tattoo with them. Multiple individuals chose to get a tattoo or tattoos which represent several relationships at once, such as tattooing the birth dates of their immediate family members or getting a bouquet of flowers where each flower represents a loved one.

Affect Management

As predicted based on the available literature, several students selected tattoos serving the purpose of affect management. They spoke of a variety of difficulties and the ways in which their tattoos marked either the difficulty itself or the process of overcoming it. These tattoos were not confined to memorializing loved ones, but also included themes such as struggling with mental illness, enduring bullying, and finding strength through adversity. As such, I adopted a broader definition of Atkinson’s (2003) affect management category, which encompassed not only the loss of a loved one but also interpersonal difficulties and longer processes involving negative affect.

In the original conceptualization of affect management tattoos, individuals choose a symbol that represents a lost family member or friend. “[My tattoo is] my deceased father’s name in traditional Chinese characters on my right scapula” (“Chris”, male, 20 years old). These tattoos are inherently relational in nature as they mark the significance of the relationship, and the deceased individual, in the person’s life. Some of these memorial tattoos take on an additional level of relational meaning as more than one member of the deceased’s social circle will get a tattoo together. “I promised my mom I’d get my first tattoo with her.... My first tattoo would be in memory of [my] grandfather who was someone I was extremely close to. I’d like to get the date he passed somewhere close to my heart or that has a connection to the heart.” (“Hana”, female, 21 years old).

Other tattoos in the sample were more internal in nature. They dealt with personal struggles rather than negative experiences related to the loss of loved ones. The negative affect and subsequent coping symbolized in these tattoos occurred over time and did not consist of a discrete negative event, such as a death.

“When I was twelve years old, I was diagnosed with depression. My sister gave me a ring that said “Believe” on it as a constant reminder that I could get through it. I wore the ring every day. On June 18th, 2015 I was working and my ring came off with a pair of latex gloves that I was wearing and I did not notice until it was too late. I lost the ring that day. So the tattoo symbolizes that although I may have lost the ring, the idea behind it will always stay with me, which is why it is in an infinity symbol with the word Believe in it. The three birds are representative of my siblings and I and are all in different stages of flight to represent our different stages in our lives” (“Brenna”, female, 20 years old).

“For me, I place purposely on areas of my body I am uncomfortable with. I used to only ever wear jeans because I hated my legs, but now I feel comfortable wearing shorts. I think they're a perfect way for people uncomfortable with themselves to embrace who they are” (“Claudia”, female, 22 years old).

Both of these descriptions demonstrate the way that tattoos can serve to commemorate personal struggles with mental wellbeing. Claudia says that tattoos allow people who are uncomfortable with themselves to embrace who they are, a means of dealing with the negative affect associated with low self-esteem.

Another novel addition to the affect management label were tattoos which serve as affect management through encouraging healthy coping and emotional regulation. Such tattoos served as affect management not through acknowledging a negative experience, such as the loss of a loved one, but through serving as a reminder of coping strategies. One participant described her next planned tattoo, which would be “Breathe, do the next right thing” written in her mother’s handwriting and explained that the quote was “a classic line she has told me throughout my entire life and sticks with me whenever I am going through a difficult time” (“Priya”, female participant, 20 years old). This tattoo would not represent a negative experience but would serve as affect management by helping the participant to manage negative feelings when experiencing difficulties.

Role Transition

As predicted based on the transitory nature of college as a time in life, several participants reported tattoos which fall under the category of role transition. In our data, we found tattoos which marked both distinct events in participants’ lives as well as tattoos marking longer processes of transition or transformation. An example of a distinct event is an experience traveling:

“My sixth tattoo I got while I was on the Ireland [short study abroad trip] with Drew [University] this past January. I went to a tattoo shop in County Donegal with my roommate, who is now one of my best friends. I got a Claddagh on the back of my neck, right below my first tattoo. It is in black ink, and is about four inches. The Claddagh means love, loyalty and friendship, which accurately represented what that trip meant to me” (“Hilary”, female, 19 years old).

This tattoo not only commemorates a fond experience in the individual's life, but actually became part of that experience. Because this participant chose to get her tattoo while on the study abroad trip, the process of obtaining the tattoo with her roommate presumably served to both enhance her traveling experience and strengthen her relationship with her roommate, whom she attested is now a good friend.

Although there were descriptions of tattoos marking both distinct events and more gradual processes, the majority of role transition tattoos fell into the latter category. Many of these process commemorating tattoos also fell under the affect management label, as they marked overcoming difficult times in one's life such as dealing with bullying or mental illness. Although they marked difficult times in the individuals' lives, these tattoos were described in a positive manner, focusing on the movement away from a negative situation rather than on the situation itself.

“I had been wanting a tattoo for a while. I decided to get the compass tattoo and design it myself because I had been struggling for quite a time with my mental illness, and after 3 hospitalizations and finally going back to school, I decided this would be a nice symbol of finding my direction in life and maintaining it” (“Patrick”, male participant, 24 years old).

In our data, no tattoos were described that commemorated solely positive processes. The positive role transition tattoos almost all came from briefer, more distinct experiences, such as tattoo commemorating the short study abroad trip, described above. However, much like analyzing the gendered nature of tattoos, the distinction between what constitutes a process and what constitutes a distinct event is largely subjective.

Nostalgic Tattoos. Many of the participants described tattoos that related to nostalgia, typically of one's childhood. This theme appeared in enough responses that I decided to code it as a sub-category of role transition. Certainly, all tattoos in this category could be counted as a transition from childhood to adulthood, but this type of tattoo seemed different because they mark one's childhood without specifically marking a transition out of childhood or into adulthood. These tattoos could be seen as an exception to the previous observation that most process commemorating tattoos represent leaving a negative situation, given that one can assume the individual's childhood was at least somewhat pleasant if they chose to get a tattoo as "nostalgia".

One participant described her tattoo, an image of the Orion constellation, and its meaning for her: "In the winter the Orion constellation rises above my house. As a child I would always run outside to find it. I could always find Orion and it reminded me of my childhood" ("Carolyn", female, 18 years old). This tattoo specifically relates to the participant's childhood through memories of the house in which she grew up, while other nostalgic tattoos related to less concrete aspects of childhood, such as cherished games or books. As one participant described, "I plan on building a half sleeve on my right arm of images/symbols from literature and stories that I grew up with" ("Jenni", female, 23 years old). Nostalgia tattoos may also fall under additional categories, by connecting individuals to their family or friends or marking individual

differences through representing an identity or value. “The tattoo...symbolizes not wanting to grow up and holding onto that small part of me that will always be a child even as I do inevitably get older” (“Ash”, non-binary, 19 years old).

Marking Individual Differences

Atkinson’s third category was described as “marking individual differences” and consisted of most tattoos which did not fall easily into the affect management or role transition categories (2003). In the present research, this category is split into two subcategories, tattoos that serve to express a part of one’s identity and tattoos that are chosen for purely aesthetic reasons, seemingly “just because”. The differentiation between these two categories was made because I determined that they represented two different motivations. An identity tattoo serves to reinforce the individual’s sense of identity and self and perhaps to convey important aspects of their identity to others, whereas a tattoo chosen purely on personal preference or aesthetics may signal something about the individual’s artistic sensibilities or preferences but not about themselves in a deeper sense (Pentina & Spears, 2011). One participant described her tattoo as a black line image of a bee located on the upper thigh. When describing the meaning behind this tattoo, the participant merely responded “I like bees” (“Jill”, female, 19 years old). This illustrates the nature of personal preference tattoos in that they do not seem to signal a deeper meaning or provide insight into the person, but are seen more as artwork. When providing comments at the end of the survey, many participants, both tattooed and not, spoke of tattoos as an art form: “I am a huge fan of tattoos. I see them as art upon your body, and an incredible form of self-expression” (“Julia”, female, 19 years old).

Identity marking tattoos are similar to personal preference tattoos in that they differentiate the individual from others around them; however, they differ in the level of meaning

an individual places on the tattoo and the amount of information that one can learn about the individual based on hearing the reason behind the tattoo. An example of an identity tattoo from the present data is a large cross on the participant's upper arm, with a vine wrapping around it and two flowers growing on the vine. When describing the meaning behind this tattoo, she wrote:

“God has always been a part of my life... Even though I was raised Christian, there was a period of my life that I certainly did not act like it and that I am not proud of. ...But God changed that. He made himself real to me and now I am a completely different person. ...God took my "ugly" life and made it beautiful... The cross with the flowers and vine is meant to symbolize how God changed my life from something ugly and turned it into something beautiful and the fact that it is on my forearm is so that I can always see it and be reminded of what God has done in my life” (“Sarah”, female participant, 18 years old).

This tattoo represents an important aspect of the participant's identity, that of a Christian. This person chose the location of her tattoo so that it is always visible and serves as a reminder of this identity.

“I really am not sure [what tattoo I would want], maybe something science-y because that's not only my field of work, but one of the main pillars in my life/character” (“Scott”, male, 22 years old).

In this aspect, identity tattoos are often similar to tattoos which reinforce or commemorate values, and yet an identity is something more distinct and serves as more of a bin into which the person can place themselves. A person may get a tattoo representing the value of kindness, and their definition of this value may be different from anyone else's. By getting a tattoo which

represents and identity, whether that be related to religion, career, gender, or any other important aspect, the person is connecting themselves to other individuals who share this identity, even if their personal definition of what it means to be a member of this group differs from others.

Value Tattoos

The value category was added based on conceptualization by Pentina and Spears (2011) and because several participants described tattoos that represented important values in their lives. As discussed above, value tattoos often share similar motivations to affect management and role transition tattoos, and may also fall into these categories, yet these tattoos represent a unique category due to the use of these tattoos as a permanent reminder to live in line with specified values. Describing the meaning behind her first tattoo, one participant wrote,

“I needed a reminder to be calm and not stressed or frustrated with life. I came across this saying "walk with peace" and it resonated with me. I needed to take each step meaningfully and remember that I am connected to the world and that every action I take should be loving and meaningful” (“Chelsea”, female, 22 years old).

This particular person chose the symbol and placement of her tattoo, an arrow placed on the foot, in order to align with the value that she wanted to emphasize. The tattoo also likely serves as affect management, in that it reminds the individual “not to be stressed or frustrated with life”. Value tattoos often follow this format, where the individual choose the symbol in order to align with a pre-specified meaning. These tattoos are perhaps most different from personal preference/artistic tattoos, which are chosen almost solely on the symbol with no added meaning.

Non-tattooed Participants’ Perspectives on Others’ Tattoos

Although they were not tattooed, many of the non-tattooed participants expressed their opinions on tattoos, both their own hypothetical tattoos and the tattoos of others. As discussed

above, many of these individuals chose not to become tattooed owing to wanting a meaningful tattoo and not knowing what to choose, along with worries about regretting non-meaningful tattoos. Qualitative responses reiterated these sentiments with participants making statements like, “I don't want to get a tattoo if it doesn't mean something important to me” (“Marie”, female, 18 years old) and “If I was to get a tattoo I would want it to reflect something important to myself. It would take time to choose an image that is significant to me. In [the] situation of [getting] a tattoo, the future must be taken into account along with your changing perception of an idea or object” (“Graham”, male, 19 years old).

Much like the difference between people who obtained aesthetic, personal preference tattoos and those who got tattoos for more identity or experientially driven reasons, there appears to be a split among non-tattooed participants as to their opinion of others' tattoos. Some participants did not choose to become tattooed but appeared to have no negative views of tattoos on others, regardless of the motivations behind these tattoos. These participants often expressed appreciation for tattoos as an art form with statements like “I think the human body everyone's own individual canvas. The art you put on it only shows your individuality and how you express yourself” (“Amanda”, female, 18 years old), “I think tattoos are beautiful, but I do not see myself getting one” (“Cora”, female, 20 years old), and “Although I want my tattoos to be meaningful, I completely support people's decision to get tattoos that don't have meaning or are just for fun or for aesthetics” (“Kiera”, female, 18 years old). These participants seem to be accepting of an individual's decision to get a tattoo “just because”, even if they would never want a tattoo for themselves or would want one with a deeper meaning.

Contrary to this, there was a subset of non-tattooed participants who, while not necessarily expressing inherently anti-tattoo sentiments in general, seemed to respect tattoos with

meaningful narratives more than purely aesthetic designs. Expressions of these sentiments can be seen in responses such as, “I respect people who have visible tattoos with deep meanings because they are not afraid of what people think or the pain it would take to get the tattoo done” (“Elizabeth”, female, 18 years old) and “I like tattoos on people that have meaning. Like if a family member close died and people have their name or date or something meaningful of that person” (“Shauna”, female, 18 years old). Others expressed their belief in the superiority of tattoos with meaningful narratives more expressly with remarks such as, “Only get them if they mean something significant to you” (“Kelsey”, female, 18 years old) and “For people who want tattoos, I think they should have some special meaning, not to get a picture of something just to have it on their body” (“Ellen”, female, 19 years old). These opinions were repeated multiple times in individuals’ comments throughout the data.

Overall, it appeared that the majority of non-tattooed individuals supported others’ rights to get at least certain types of tattoos. Very few individuals expressed negative opinions of tattooed people or the practice of tattooing. Tattoos being an individual choice was a common sentiment expressed among non-tattooed individuals, through statements such as “I think tattoos are fine. It really isn't up to me to decide whether it's a good or bad thing. If people want to express something on their bodies, then let them” (“Summer”, female, 18 years old). However, a few students did have apparently strong beliefs about tattoos on others, regardless of the meanings attributed to them. One such student left the comment: “There is no reason to have a tattoo, unless the person can't see what a clean body is worth. Why desecrate a body, regardless of how pretty the picture is? There is body art that paints over a nude body, but that can be removed; that isn't destroying the body with every stroke of a needle” (“Connor”, male, 20 years old). Additionally, a few of the non-tattooed sample expressed beliefs that tattoos had become

extremely mainstream, whether citing this as a reason for their abstinence from tattooing practices or not. As one participant put it, “I like being able to say that I don’t have a tattoo! Because it feels like everyone has one now” (“Maria”, female, 22 years old). These findings in the data highlight the diverse attitudes towards tattooing among non-tattooed individuals and highlight the need for more research into non-tattooed populations.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Future Implications

This exploratory study provides a picture of the current state of tattoos in a college population. Most participants were not tattooed, and the majority of non-tattooed participants were not planning on becoming tattooed in the immediate future. A greater percentage of women were tattooed than men, reflecting findings of increased prevalence among females from previous research (Dickson et al., 2015). In line with previous findings, the majority of participants did not become tattooed on impulse, planning for a period of time before becoming tattooed (Dundes & Francis, 2016).

In addition to gaining an understanding of college students' tattooing practices, this study sought to increase knowledge about the motivations behind choosing whether or not to become tattooed and to explore the narratives and meaning ascribed to tattoos. The primary reason participants cited for not obtaining a tattoo was because they were afraid they would regret the decision. This was mirrored in non-tattooed participants' qualitative responses, in which many voiced abstinence from tattooing because they would want a tattoo with meaning and could not think of any such image.

Qualitative analysis of planned and current tattoos supported the themes of affect management, role transition, marking individual differences, and values, which were formulated by previous researchers (Atkinson, 2003; Pentina & Spears, 2011). Emergent themes were nostalgia tattoos, a subset of role transitions, identity tattoos, a subset of marking individual differences, and family/relational tattoos. The stories participants told about their tattoos illustrate the way in which a single tattoo often aligned with several of these themes and highlight the depth of knowledge that a qualitative approach to understanding tattoos can facilitate. The themes of role transition and affect management were especially interconnected,

with many role transition tattoos representing overcoming struggles or leaving a negative situation. This was a novel finding, as the previous literature highlighted more concrete negative experiences, such as the loss of a loved one, and did not discuss the process of overcoming adversity as something which could be commemorated in a tattoo. Within these themes, participants discussed the role that mental health played in their tattoos. Tattoos were used both to commemorate struggles with mental illness and as reminders of strength and encouragement for coping. Mental health and self-care have been increasingly promoted in recent years and the future may see more people considering their mental health when becoming tattooed and forming narratives related to health and resilience surrounding their tattoos. Upon analysis of the present data, it became clear that conducting follow up interviews with participants would provide additional valuable data. Such interviews would allow one to see the tattoos discussed, explore themes brought up by the participants, and ask for elaboration or clarification in real time.

While several of the tattooed participants reported tattoos imbued with multiple meanings, there was a subset of the sample in which tattoos were obtained for solely aesthetic reasons, essentially “just because”. This theme was discussed both by tattooed and non-tattooed participants; non-tattooed participants seemed especially divided on this issue, with some stating that tattoos were an art form and that no one should care what an individual chooses to ink on their bodies and others arguing that tattoos should have meaning. These and other responses from non-tattooed participants highlight the diverse opinions of non-tattooed individuals on tattoos. While research on tattoos has historically focused on tattooed individuals, it may prove illuminative to examine the views of those without tattoos, particularly as they relate to demographically similar individuals who chose to become tattooed. The preference among non-

tattooed people for “meaningful” tattoos may be a glimpse into a new form of tattoo stigma. Perhaps in the future tattooed people will have to worry about workforce discrimination not based on the existence of tattoos but on their style and perceived depth of meaning.

In addition to examining the narratives and motivations behind tattoos, this study explored the role that gender played in college students’ tattoo decisions. Participants were not asked directly about the gendered nature of their tattoos, and gender was mostly expressed through tattoo descriptions, both in the chosen image and in the language participants used to describe their tattoos. Femininity was expressed more often than masculinity, which illustrated the way that female stereotypes are more accessible and that maleness is treated as the standard and is generally only noted through a lack of overt femininity. Future research would do well to ask participants explicitly about how they understand their tattoos in relation to their gender, and whether they consider their own tattoos to be gender conforming or non-conforming. Additionally, the present sample was predominantly female, and future research with more evenly distributed gender ratios may find other ways in which gender, especially masculinity, is expressed through tattoos. Lastly, concern about gender discrimination was not listed as a possible reason not to get a tattoo and only one participant explicitly mentioned gender perceptions as a deterrent to obtaining a tattoo. Although prior research suggests that tattooed women are viewed more negatively than tattooed men, no studies have examined how people consider their own gender as it relates to tattoo decisions.

Another question of interest was how college students, who will enter the workforce with increased credentials and likely obtain traditionally “white collar” jobs, view tattoos in relation to employability and how tattooed students navigate any perceived professional stigma. Most participants agreed somewhat that it was more difficult for tattooed participants to obtain a job;

however, this was more of a concern for non-tattooed participants. In a similar vein, most tattooed participants disagreed with the notion that they were concerned about their own employability based on their tattoos. Despite this apparent lack of concern amongst tattooed participants, qualitative responses suggested that they were aware of a stigma against tattoos in the workplace. Several tattooed participants noted that their tattoos were placed on “hideable” skin, such as the ribcage. Additionally, many participants, both tattooed and non-tattooed, commented directly on the stigma of tattoos in the workforce, expressing feelings that employers should “change with the times” and that this stigma was present yet decreasing. These findings suggest that current college students perceive a stigma of tattoos in professional settings and generally choose to refrain from tattooing or obtain a tattoo in an “appropriate” location, regardless of whether or not they believe this stigma to be justified. It would be helpful in future research to ask participants for their opinions on tattoos and employability specifically in relation to the size and placement of tattoos, or perhaps to the type of desired profession.

Although this study serves to replicate certain findings regarding tattooing behaviors and provides novel information about the perception and meanings of tattoos in a college sample, the research was exploratory and its main use is to provide preliminary findings and inform future research. Given this primarily descriptive view of a relatively small and homogenous sample, future research would benefit a more focused, in depth view and should aim to study more generalizable samples. There is a lack of current research, post the early 2000s, which uses qualitative methods to answer questions related to tattooing. This may be problematic for two reasons. First, as seen in the results of this study, many tattoos fall into multiple categories of motivation and meaning and themes often emerge qualitatively which would not have been addressed by previously conceived quantitative measures. Second, there seems to have been a

distinct shift in the popular perception of tattoos in recent decades. Much qualitative research on tattoos in the early 2000s focus on tattoos as political statements, signs of resistance, and as especially transgressive for women (Atkinson, 2002; Burgess & Clark, 2010). Given my findings, it seems that tattoos are not seen as inherently resistant or political as they once were and are obtained for a variety of reasons. Similarly, while there may still be differences in the enactment of gender in tattoos, becoming tattooed does not appear to be as drastic or transgressive for women as research from the early 2000s describes, with more women adopting tattoos than men.

Although there was a clear logic behind studying college students, researching tattoos in an older population would provide certain opportunities to answer questions related to tattoos in relation to life experience and change in identity over time. The labels of affect management and role transitions would be particularly interesting to explore as older individuals would likely have experienced more negative life events and gone through more transitions. I hypothesized that role transition tattoos might be especially popular among college students as college is an inherently transitory time in life. In the present sample, several participants reported nostalgia tattoos, serving as reminders of their childhoods. These tattoos may serve not only to remind individuals of their pasts but may also to provide a cohesive identity for the individual so that their past and present are linked. It would be interesting to see if older adults also had nostalgic tattoos and if they continued to obtain tattoos for each subsequent transition and shift in identity in order to increase continuity and treat the body as a canvas for personal narration. A possible example of this would be parental tattoos, where individuals get tattoos representing their children. Such a tattoo might include a child's footprints, handwriting, or birth date. Additionally, in an older sample, it would be possible to study tattoo-related regrets. Only two

individuals in the present sample discussed having tattoo regrets, but this is likely a result of the young age of the participants and the fact that most of their tattoos were relatively new. To date, no one has researched tattoo-related regret in non-tattooed samples, and it would be interesting to study older adults who chose not to have tattoos and investigate whether or not they regret that decision.

In the interest of understanding how young, qualified individuals navigate their desire for tattoos and their goals of entering more traditional professional spaces, I studied current college students. However, as is demonstrated by the disparity between the research from the early 2000s and present tattooing practices, views around tattoos continue to change. As such, it would be advantageous to employ longitudinal methods to study the shift in tattoo perspectives and practices over time. It would be illuminating to follow the current college students as they progress into the workforce and continue to form the narratives around their tattoo and change the way they relate to their body modifications.

This study illustrated the multifaceted way in which college students think about tattoos, both in their decisions on whether or not to become tattooed and in the meanings and they ascribe to their body modifications. It seems that as cultural understanding shifts, so too do the behaviors of young individuals hoping to enter the mainstream professional workforce. In the present sample, many individuals refrained from becoming tattooed or chose tattoos that were acceptable or coverable in some way. Several participants commented on the broader perceptions of tattoos, expressing their beliefs that tattoos were becoming more popular and generally expressing somewhat positive attitudes towards at least certain forms of tattoos or towards individuals' rights to become tattooed. It is likely that, Western society continued changes will be reflected in the behaviors and opinions of the young generation. The practice of tattooing has

a long and at times turbulent history, with differing periods of acceptance and stigmatization in various societies. Currently, we are in a period where tattoos are tolerated but perhaps not accepted by all, especially those who make up the majority of upper-class employers, educators, and government officials. Tattooing will likely have a similarly long future, and only time will tell what ebbs and flows of acceptance lie ahead.

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Tables

Table 1

Frequency of Ethnic Categories

	Asian	Black	Latino	Native American	White	Other
Frequency	19	13	28	2	151	3
Percent	9.7	6.6	14.3	1	77	1.5

Table 2

Frequency of Parental Education

Parental Education Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less Than High School	4	2	2
High School Degree	22	11.2	13.3
Some College, No Degree	23	11.7	25
Associate's Degree	8	4.1	29.1
Bachelor's Degree	64	32.7	61.7
Graduate or Professional Degree	55	28.1	89.8
Ph.D.	20	10.2	100
Total	196	100	

Table 3

Frequency of Reasons for Not Getting a Tattoo

	Employment Concerns	Family Concerns	Fear of Needles or Pain	Monetary Concerns	Regret Concerns	Uncertainty	Other
Frequency	47	49	39	37	67	60	40
Percent	35.1	35.5	28.3	26.8	48.6	43.5	29

Appendices

Appendix I

Tattooing Beliefs and Behaviors Consent Form

1. INTRODUCTION

You are invited to be a participant in a research study about college students' beliefs and decisions on tattoos. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an undergraduate student. We ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Darci Gautam, an undergraduate psychology student at Drew University, and Professor Patrick Dolan of Drew.

2. BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study is to gain additional knowledge about the prevalence of tattoos among college students as well as their beliefs or thoughts on tattoos. Prior research has shown that many college students do get tattoos, but that many also believe tattoos may limit future job opportunities. In this research, we hope to gain an understanding not only of students perceptions of tattoos in general, but of their personal experiences and beliefs regarding tattoos.

3. DURATION

The length of time you will be involved with this study is approximately 30 minutes. This study can be completed much more quickly, but we encourage you to take the time to fully answer each question.

4. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things. You will be asked a variety of questions regarding tattooing practices in your life. Then you will be asked about your decision to either get a tattoo or not. Then you will be asked about any future plans you may have for tattoos and your thought process regarding this decision. Lastly, you will be asked to answer a variety of demographic questions (age, gender, etc.).

5. RISKS/BENEFITS

Risks: There are minimal risks involved in participating in this study. You will be asked about your tattoo(s) or your decision not to get a tattoo and there is a possibility that your answers may be personal or emotional in nature. However, if any of the questions would be upsetting to answer you can always answer the question in less detail or even skip the question entirely. Our goal is to get an understanding of what tattoos mean to you and not to upset you in any way.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

While it is impossible to guarantee complete confidentiality on an online survey, all means have been taken to assure your confidentiality in this study. No personal identifying information will be associated with your responses. No names will be attached to any material you submit. Only the researchers will have access to your individual responses, and these data will be stored securely.

7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Drew University. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty.

8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

You will be thoroughly debriefed upon completion of this study. This debriefing includes a thorough description of the purpose of the study as well as an explanation of the methods used and the hypotheses made by the researchers. The researchers conducting this study are Darci Gautam and Professor Patrick Dolan. You may ask any questions you have right now or in the future by contacting Darci Gautam (dgautam@drew.edu) or Patrick Dolan (973-408-3558/pdolan@drew.edu). If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researchers, you may contact Scott Morgan, chair of Drew Institutional Review Board for research, smorgan@drew.edu.

9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT

The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Drew Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.

Appendix II

Tattooing Beliefs and Behaviors Debriefing Form

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study in which you just participated was designed to examine the tattooing beliefs and behaviors of college students from a variety of demographic groups. We were particularly interested in students' reasons for getting or not getting a tattoo and, if they have a tattoo or plan to get one, how they make the decision of what specific tattoo to get.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study was very similar for all participants and involved answering questions about tattoos. Those with tattoos were asked questions about their specific tattoos and decision process, whereas those without tattoos were asked about their decision not to get a tattoo.

3. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There is a great deal of research regarding tattoos and tattooing behaviors amongst college students:

Dundes, L., & Francis, A. (2016). Inking and thinking: honors students and tattoos. *College Student Journal*, 50(2), 219-223.

Foltz, K. A. (2014). The Millennial's perception of tattoos: Self expression or business faux pas?. *College Student Journal*, 48(4), 589-602.

Madfis, E., & Arford, T. (2013). The dilemmas of embodied symbolic representation: Regret in contemporary American tattoo narratives. *The Social Science Journal*, 50(4), 547-556.

4. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you are interested in learning more about the research being conducted, or the results of the research of which you were a part, please do not hesitate to contact Darci Gautam (dhautam@drew.edu) or Patrick Dolan(973-408-3558/pdolan@drew.edu).

Thank you for your help and participation in this study!

If you know anyone who is in college and would be interested in taking this survey, please share the link!

Appendix III

Questions for all participants

Do you have at least one tattoo?

Yes

No

Which members of your immediate family have tattoos? Select all that apply

None

Father

Mother

Sibling(s)

Other (please explain) _____

About how many of your same-aged friends have at least one tattoo?

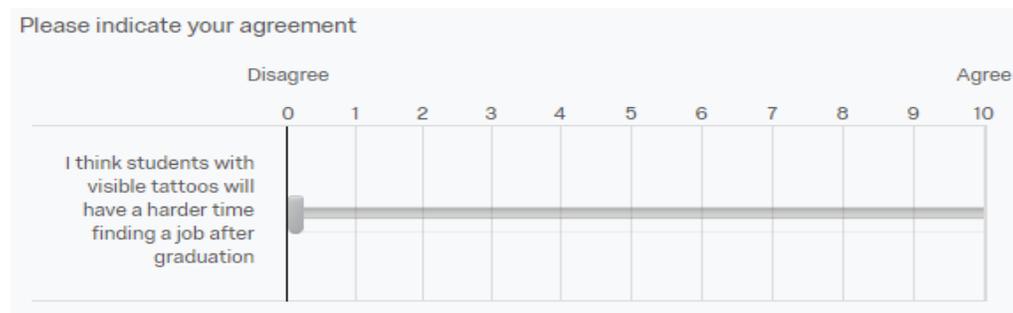
None of my friends

A few of my friends

About half of my friends

Most of my friends

All of my friends



Appendix IV

Questions for tattooed participants

How many tattoos do you have?

How old were you when you got your first tattoo?

How long did you plan before getting your first tattoo?

Less than 48 hours

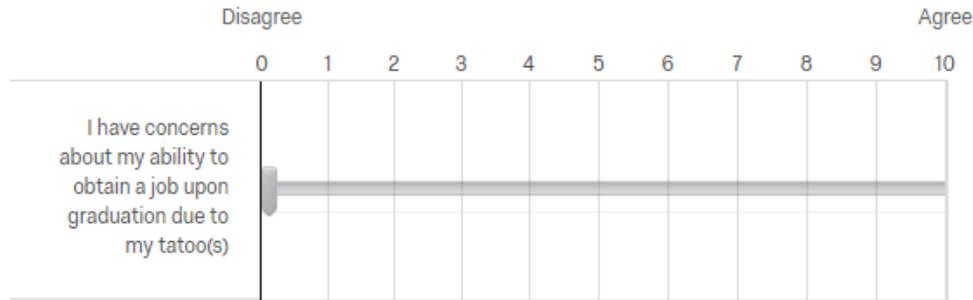
Less than a month

Less than 6 months

Less than a year

A year or more

Please indicate your agreement.



Tell us about your first tattoo. We would like to know as much about your specific tattoo as possible. Please include information about the size of the tattoo, placement, image or script, color, font, and any other information that would help us to visualize your tattoo.

(Text entry box)

We would like to know about your reasoning behind getting the specific image, symbols, or words that you chose for your first tattoo.

People get tattoos for a wide variety of reasons and we are interested in studying these reasons. Some possible reasons include celebrating relationships between loved ones, marking important life events, to be unique, to look attractive, and to commit to a cause or ideal. These are just some reasons that influence individuals' choice of tattoo.

Please tell us the story behind your first tattoo. We would like to know information about how you decided to get a tattoo, how you chose what image or symbol to get, how you visualized the placement and design of your tattoo, the personal meaning behind your tattoo, and any other information that was relevant to your thought process in getting your first tattoo.

Please feel free to write as much as you would like.

(Text entry box)

Are you planning on getting any more tattoos in the future?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Please take this space to tell us anything you would like to about your plans for future tattoos or tattoos that you already have which are not your first tattoo. You can talk about anything from your reasons behind this tattoo(s), the design, or when you might get it or how long you planned before getting it.

(Text entry box)

Appendix V**Questions for non-tattooed participants**

Do you plan on getting tattoos in the future?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

What has kept you from getting a tattoo? (Select all that apply)

- Money
- I wouldn't know what to get
- I'm concerned about what my family might think
- I'm afraid I might regret it
- Employment concerns
- Fear of pain or needles
- Other (please explain) _____

Please take the time to answer the above question in more detail. We want to know more about your thought process regarding tattoos and how important each of the above factors were in your decision not to get a tattoo.

(Text entry box)

If you are planning to get a tattoo in the future, please tell us about your planned tattoo. We would like to know about your planned design including placement and symbols and would also like to know about how you decided what type of images or words you would like and what meaning they have.

(Text entry box)

Appendix VI**Demographic Questions**

What is your age in years?

What is your gender

- Male
- Female
- Other _____

What is your ethnicity? (Select one or more)

- Black or African American
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Hispanic/Latino
- White
- Other _____

What is your college major(s)?

What institution do you attend?

College of St. Elizabeth

Drew University

Fairleigh Dickinson University

Seton Hall University

Other _____

Are you a member of the honors program at your institution?

Yes

No

What is the highest degree or level of education your parent(s) or guardian(s) have completed?

Less than high school

High school diploma (includes equivalency)

Some college, no degree

Associate's degree

Bachelor's degree

Graduate or professional degree

Ph.D.

Lastly, please use this space to give us any more information you would like about your tattoos, opinions on tattoos, or your experience of taking this survey.

(Text entry box)

Appendix VII

Recruitment emails to other institutions

Email to IRB Heads:

Dear Dr. _____,

I am reaching out to inquire about gaining access to students at _____ school for research purposes. I am a psychology major at Drew University and am currently collecting data for my honors thesis, which will investigate tattoo beliefs and behaviors in college students. Because Drew is a small university and I am interested in recruiting as many participants as possible, I was hoping to recruit at your institution as well as my own.

My study has been approved by the Drew University Institutional Review Board and I would be happy to fill out any additional documentation required by _____ school. The study will focus on tattooing amongst college students, gaining information about the prevalence of tattoos, attitudes towards tattoos, and the decision process behind choosing to obtain a tattoo and behind what image or symbols to get. Another variable of interest is whether there are group differences amongst students based on their enrollment status in their school's honors program. Previous research by Dundes and Francis (2016) found that honors students typically planned

longer before getting a tattoo and were less concerned about employment prospects based on their tattoo(s).

I wanted to reach out to the IRB of _____ school to request permission to recruit subjects from your institution. Attached is a copy of the IRB form that was approved at Drew University. Attached in this email is Dr. Patrick Dolan, a member of the psychology faculty at Drew University and my thesis advisor. Any additional questions you may have can be addressed to either me or him.

Best Regards,
Darci Gautam

Paragraph Specific to Psychology Department Heads:

I wanted to reach out to the psychology department at _____ school to see if you had any advice on collecting participants at your school in particular. In addition to word of mouth advertisement in classes, Drew University has a daily campus wide email where students are invited to advertise events as well as digital signage in many of our buildings where one can submit a flyer to be displayed. If there are any such systems in place at _____ school, I would be happy to learn about them and how I might use them to advertise my study. Additionally, it would be very helpful if some of the faculty at _____ school were willing to promote the survey verbally to their students, ensuring that the students are aware that their decision to participate in the study will have no bearing on their grade in the course.

Paragraph Specific to Honors Program Heads:

Because I am interested in possible differences between honors and non-honors students, I planned to reach out to you in the hopes that you could provide information about how to reach out to honors students at your institution in particular. If there is some form of email list, bulletin board, or regular meeting of honors students, I would appreciate the opportunity to advertise my study at these locations.

Appendix VIII

Flyers for survey

