

Life as a Work of Art: The Impact of Tattoos on Daily Experience

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen a rise in the prominence of tattoos in mainstream culture emerging from a documented history of social stigma. The present qualitative study sought to understand the conflicting ways in which popularity, subculture, and historical bias come together through the lived experience of tattooed individuals. Through a series of semi-structured interviews ($n = 5$), participants described their motivation for getting tattooed, the personal meaning they assign to the process and outcome, and how being visibly tattooed impacts their day-to-day lives. A thematic analysis uncovered three key themes as major facets of participants' experience: diversity of motivators, community & subculture, and stigma concerns. A dissonance between superficial mainstream acceptance and latent fear of discrimination was a key finding of the research. Findings and social implications are discussed.

Keywords: Tattoos, stereotypes, stigma, subculture, societal norms, symbolism, personal expression.

Introduction:

The Impact of Tattoos on Daily Experience
From ancient origins to contemporary society, tattoos have reflected culture, art, and attitudes between groups throughout human history. They have been used as symbols of group membership, tools of oppression, and a means of artistic expression. In recent history, tattoos have traditionally carried negative associations, and those who choose to don them have become subject to stereotypes and stigma (Broussard & Harton, 2018). The current prevalence of tattoos in mainstream society represents a very recent shift in popular culture, somewhat at odds with previous attitudes which held tattoos as a working-class marker. Within the constantly evolving landscape of culture, there remains a pervasive bias underlying attitudes toward this form of artistic expression. As time goes on and cultural attitudes change, so must our understanding. The present study explored the current reasons people choose to get tattooed, the personal meaning they assign to the process and outcome, and how being visibly tattooed impacts their day-to-day lives. This research sought to understand the conflicting ways that popularity, subculture, and historical bias come together in the lived experience of

tattooed individuals.

Literature Review

Early History

Tattoos have been a part of human culture for centuries, and there are even indications that they date back millennia. Early evidence of tattoos has been found in archaeological remains dating back to 12,000 BC (Khosla et al., 2010). Recently, the oldest natural mummy in the world, Ötzi 'the Iceman' from 5300 years ago, was discovered bearing tattoos in what is now southeastern Europe (Kayiran et al., 2020). Throughout history, tattoos have been used for a wide range of purposes and have symbolized values of contrasting ideals. Some Indigenous cultures in New Zealand, Hawaii, Tahiti, and Polynesia have traditionally used tattoos to symbolize group membership and an expression of social status within a community. Other regions such as Japan, China, India, and Egypt have historical evidence of tattoos being used to identify members of a specific group or tribe (Khosla et al., 2010). Although tattooing has widespread origins, the art had recessed in the Dark and Middle Ages, aside from lawbreakers at that time (Khosla et al., 2010). When Western populations encountered these Indigenous populations against the

backdrop of colonialism, they imposed an ‘outsider’s view’ on these practices, and tattoos were perceived as an ‘unnatural practice’ (Camacho & Brown, 2018). These social dynamics led to the human exhibitions of tattooed people for entertainment and scrutiny by Western populations. Because sailors were the first to encounter these populations, they were the first to adopt tattoos as their own. Traditional imagery that reflected nature and the cultures’ traditions was replaced by geometric designs, guns, letters, and scripts for sailors’ tattoos. From there, tattoos became symbols of masculinity and philosophical ideals such as rebellion against societal norms (Hunter, 2019).

Recent History

In the late 19th century, tattoos were briefly associated with upper-class populations because they symbolized knowledge of a foreign culture. This association ended when the electric tattoo machine was invented, which rapidly expanded accessibility to tattoos, making them more affordable to lower-class populations (Roberts, 2012). From the 1920s onward, tattoos became associated with mental illness and social undesirability. Through that time, tattoos were used to identify prisoners which became tools of oppression. This fed the cycle of ‘system justification theory’, which suggests that social roles are perpetuated by stereotypes, which are legitimized by social discrepancies between groups (Broussard & Harton, 2018).

Although tattoos remained taboo throughout the 20th century, their acceptance has grown over time. The 21st century has evolved to include motivations for getting tattoos, including symbolism, artistic expression, and medical uses (Kayiran et al., 2020). Even symbols that were originally designed to oppress populations, such as the pink triangle tattoos used in Nazi concentration camps to identify LGBTQ+ populations, have now been adopted by the people to symbolize a type of unified empowerment (Camacho & Brown, 2018). This symbol, which was rooted in hatred and oppression, was adopted to signify the power of the population it was designed to destroy.

Despite the recent normalization of tattoo culture, the social stigma and stereotypes from early tattoo culture have persisted, creating conflicting beliefs about what it means to have tattoos in modern society and how having them impacts daily life. Stereotypes and stigma have dominated public opinion of tattoos throughout recent history. Broussard and Harton (2018) posit that the origins of these attitudes derive from the ‘kernel of truth’ hypothesis, which uses a small basis of observable fact to perpetuate a stereotype. Conventional representations of tattooed people in media have propagated the image of symbols of deviance and immoral behaviour. However, contemporary media has deliberately attempted to separate tattoos from lower-class affiliations (Roberts, 2012). These depictions of tattooed people have grown to reflect two subcultures within the greater tattoo culture: ‘tattooed people’ have bold, visible tattoos on highly visible locations such as the hands, neck, or face, while ‘people with tattoos’ have them in places that are easily hidden and do not consider themselves to be a part of tattoo subculture (Roberts, 2012).

Television has played a part in bringing this previously closed community to mainstream attention. Series focused on tattooing often draw a negative reaction from tattoo artists, who express that shows like *LA Ink* provides the public with a poor view of the profession, citing health and sanitation issues as particularly damaging (Thompson, 2019). Self-declared body modification enthusiasts often declare membership to this distinct subculture through the deliberate collection of highly visible modifications; instances of gatekeeping most frequently pertain to the placement and awareness of the subculture itself (Roberts, 2017). This distinction outlines the persistence of the stigma surrounding tattoos, even from within the culture. Although individuals voluntarily choose to become tattooed and to express themselves with permanent body art, many only do so to the point where they can avoid the negative consequences of that action (Doss & Hubbard, 2009). Perhaps this is because the individual does not fully

embrace their membership in tattoo culture or merely does not want to be judged. Another possibility is that the tattooed person subscribes to the paradigm that tattoos are equivalent to social deviance (Martin & Dula, 2010).

Tattoo Research

Early research (Lombroso & Lombroso, 1972) studied links between personality and tattoos. The first version of the 'Criminal Man Theory' was discussed in the late 1870s and was based on the idea that deviance was inherited and could be identified by examining an individual's physique. This theory was short-lived but the link between a person's constitution and physical presentation is still discussed within criminology and other social disciplines. Additional research has focused on the perception of tattoos, personality, and character attributes. Broussard and Harton (2018) showed participants images of tattooed people and asked them to provide subjective ratings of 13 character attributes. For example, participants were shown images of people with or without tattoos and rated them on a seven-point scale on qualities like 'honest/dishonest', 'good/bad', or 'intelligent/unintelligent'. Each image had two versions: one with a tattoo and one without, which were used in different trials. The ratings were factored into a statistical analysis along with the gender of the person in the image, the gender of the participant, the tattoo status in the stimulus, and the tattoo status of the participant. They also probed the personality traits of participants and compared them between tattooed and non-tattooed groups. They found that tattooed and non-tattooed participants did not differ in deviant behaviours, nor most personality traits. For image ratings, tattooed individuals were judged more negatively than non-tattooed individuals. Despite being perceived as stronger and more independent, tattooed women were rated more negatively than tattooed men. Participants with tattoos were no less negative in their judgement toward tattooed individuals. They found that this negative attitude was minimized when the tattoo location, size, and content were similar to the

tattoos of the person making the judgment. It was hypothesized that this was either due to a dissociation between the self and the other or the depth of stigma that may be internalized within even tattooed people's perceptions.

With pervasive stigma and increasing commonality of tattoos, recent research has sought to expand on the motivations behind getting tattoos and the public perceptions of tattooed people. Studies have found that more young people get tattoos than older adults (Roberts, 2012). This was associated with contrasting attitudes to tattoos in general. Older adults (beyond middle age) were more likely to subscribe to the idea that tattoos symbolized deviance. In contrast, younger adults saw them as a way to express individuality. Even though seen as a means of expression, young people expressed awareness of the taboo still associated with tattoos. Therefore, the majority chose placements that would be easily hidden, even if those placements incurred a higher amount of pain (Roberts, 2012). This study also highlighted the dichotomy of 'tattooed people' versus 'people with tattoos', as participants expressed disdain for highly visible placements and bold tattoos as a kind of 'culture war' from within tattoo culture itself.

Remaining Questions

The existing literature provides compelling evidence that people with tattoos still face stigma, despite their increased popularity in contemporary culture. Because cultural attitudes and stereotypes constantly evolve, it is necessary to probe trends and attitudes towards tattoos and tattooed people. There is significant support for the assertion that tattoo stigma still exists, even among people with tattoos. Still, tattoos have become more common than ever before, and the practice shows no signs of slowing in popularity any time soon. The present study investigated motivations for getting tattoos, the community of tattoo culture, and the perceptions and stereotypes surrounding the practice. The following questions guided the research: first, what motivates people to get tattoos? Second, how does tattooing

impact the daily experience of those who have them?

Methods

Protocol Development

A pilot interview was completed in class with a student volunteer as part of the initial in-class interview assignment. This allowed us to fine-tune our research question and adapt our interview protocol. The pilot interview lasted 10 minutes and was guided by an early version of the final protocol used (see Appendix A). Upon receiving feedback and discussing the outcome of the pilot interview, a literature review was completed to develop salient research questions. Our focus was refined from a general approach exploring tattoo meanings and motivation to a more specific research area. While some studies previously examined the meaning assigned by wearers to their tattoos (Kayiran et al., 2020) and the stigma in specific social settings such as medicine and law enforcement (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Kaufmann & Armstrong, 2022; Martin & Dula, 2010), there has been little research which allows tattooed individuals to describe their lived experience in the current cultural landscape. Thus, we aimed to create a deeper understanding of this topic using a qualitative interview method. We hoped to collect data that was not specific to one social setting, age, or class of employment, to investigate themes that may be present across several lived realities. A longer and more in-depth protocol was developed to fit this approach better. Some questions from the original protocol remained, some were rearranged based on the flow of the pilot interview, and others were discarded as no longer relevant. Two researchers developed additional questions to be added. The final protocol consisted of fourteen guiding questions surrounding the experiences of having tattoos, and the motivating factors behind them. Probes were included for researchers to use or refer back to in cases where clarification was necessary. Introduction and closing statements were included as a loose suggestion to help interviewers build a comfortable atmosphere with their participants.

Participants

Interview participants were recruited by each of the researchers. The researchers knew them personally, for they were mainly friends and family members. The inclusion criteria were adults with any gender or occupation with at least one tattoo. Five participants were interviewed for this study. Each researcher interviewed one participant. The participant group was of mixed gender (two female, three male, including one transgender man), ranging in age from 22 to 52. Participants represent a variety of age groups; 20s, 40s, 50s, and two were in their early 30s. The participants had varying degrees of tattoo coverage and visibility; for some, tattoos were small and easily hidden, while others had more prominent work.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved a series of semi-structured interviews with each participant individually at a place mutually agreed upon by the researcher and interviewee. Three of the participants resided with their assigned researcher and were conducted at home. One interview was conducted over the phone and recorded on a separate device. One interview was conducted through Zoom and was recorded on a voice recorder app on a cellular device. A consent form was read aloud, verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of the interview session, and participants were reminded that the interview would be recorded. Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes to allow for the flow of discussion and in-depth exploration of the topics. The average duration of interviews was around 30 minutes, with one of the interviews lasting nearly 50 minutes. Interviews were conducted one-on-one. The pre-existing rapport between the participant and the researcher helped create a comfortable environment for the dialogue to take place, and the recordings allowed interviewers to focus on moderating the discussion and noting non-verbal cues as needed. The interviews were guided

by the interview protocol (see Appendix A), with flexibility which allowed for the researcher to pursue topics or themes as they emerged in the discussion.

Thematic Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis by the researchers. From there, emerging codes were discussed and defined. The preliminary codes were (1) Meaning and symbolism, (2) Body image, (3) Discrimination and perception, (4) Tattoo culture and norms, and (5) Change and evolution. Descriptions and examples for each code were developed and compiled into a code manual (See Appendix B). Code 1: Meaning and Symbolism described meanings and motivations that people ascribed to their tattoos. Code 2: Body Image described instances of self-perception specifically related to the individual's body. Code 3: Discrimination and Perception described experiences where the participant expressed awareness of how others perceived their tattoos (negative, positive, or neutral). Code 4: Tattoo Culture and Norms described the ways participants felt about the process of tattooing, its culture, and interactions with other tattooed individuals. Code 5: Change and Evolution described instances of data where participants expressed a change in attitude, culture, or beliefs surrounding tattoos.

To test their efficacy, all researchers applied each code to 2 transcript pages, then consulted overlap. This ensured code relevance to the research question and the collected data, as well as homogeneity in how the research team understood the codes. To ensure researchers were familiar with all transcript data, each researcher was assigned one code to analyze across all five transcripts. Coding was inserted into a group Google document for researchers to examine any double-coding, and to discuss coding decisions. Overall, the utility of the coding was agreed upon; Code 5 (Change and Evolution) often overlapped with Codes 3 and 4 (Discrimination/ Perception and Tattoo Culture/Norms) but no instances of triple coding were present. After initial coding was

complete, researchers extracted relevant data from the transcripts that fit into the codes, forming five separate code outputs. A thematic analysis of codes was performed, one researcher per code, in order to ensure thoroughness. Code analysis documents were then printed off and brought together in a meeting between three researchers, Key findings were discussed, and the search for patterns began. Within the outputs for each code, key findings in the form of sub-codes were identified: Within code 1 (Meaning and Symbolism), key findings were the memorials and tributes, visual appeal, personal meaning, symbolism, and heritage, Code 2, (Body Image) showed key findings of imagery, identity, confidence and regret. Key findings from code 3 (Discrimination and Perception) were perception from others and self, as well as feared employment discrimination. Key findings from code 4 (Tattoo Culture and Norms) were community belonging, the collaboration between artist and client, and knowledge sharing. Finally, key findings from code 5 (Change and Evolution) were personal differences in the evolution of the tattoo process, changes in understanding and general acceptance, changes in workplace acceptance, popularity/fads, and hindsight (what they wish they knew before getting tattoos).

Researchers used a visual method for this analysis (Figure 1.): key findings from all codes were written out on scraps of paper, then organized into preliminary theme categories according to their relevance to the research questions. Sub-codes which were deemed less relevant to the research questions or less salient were set aside. From here, paper scraps containing the key findings were grouped and rearranged into three themes. These themes were (1) Diversity of Motivators, (2) Community & Subculture, and (3) Stigma Concerns.

The themes and data were then sorted once again, this time according to their relevance to overall findings. A logical order of themes was established to best explain the key findings and address the research questions. Transcripts, code outputs and analysis

documents were used as reference points in gathering support for these big-picture results and helped group members conduct additional analysis according to the themes. Overlap and complementary evidence from the transcripts were frequently discussed in the writing of this report and researchers collaborated throughout the process to ensure an integrated approach to interpreting the data.

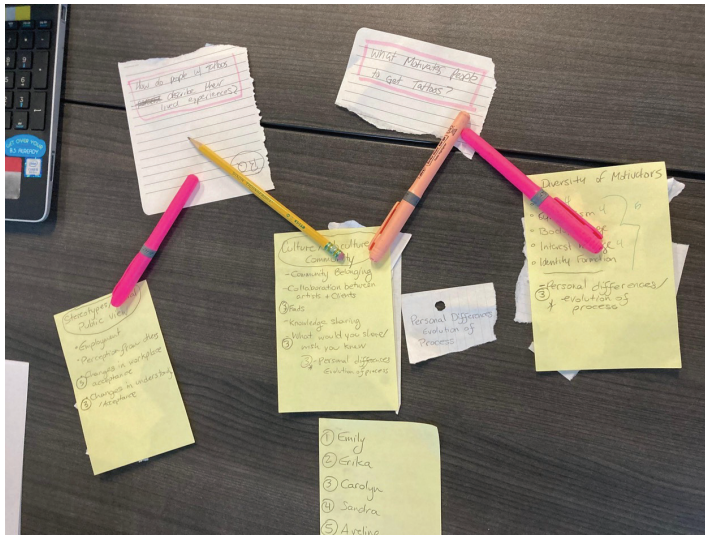


Figure 1. Visual Thematic Analysis

Note. Key findings and sub-codes were grouped according to three main themes. Pencils/markers represent connections between Themes and working research questions. Numbers represent code analysis documents where relevant material can be found.

Results

Through the ongoing process of data collection and thematic analysis, three main themes were uncovered. The first theme, Diversity of Motivators, described the different reasons the participants had for getting their tattoos. The second theme, Community and Subculture, detailed how tattooed individuals relate their own experiences to others and the inherent perceptions from within the culture. The third theme, Stigma Concerns, reviewed the ongoing changes in public perception and the pervasive negative attitudes that are often associated with tattoos and tattooed people. All three of these themes speak to the focus of the research, which explored the motivations and experiences of individuals who chose to get tattooed.

While some participants' experiences may have been more connected to one theme than others, each theme was present across all five interviews to some degree.

Diversity of Motivators

This theme represents the diversity of reasons as to why participants chose to get tattooed in general, and the motives and meaning behind their respective tattoos. Amongst the participants, many tattoos had meaning behind them. Many participants got tattoos to represent someone they love, whether it was someone that was still in their lives and meant a lot to them or a beloved who is no longer with us. For some, it was their children that inspired some of their tattoos. One participant (P1) had a tattoo that she got as a dedication to her children, but chose the shape (a butterfly) to represent her experience with Lupus: It is a butterfly tattoo that I love, like a tribal kind of tattoo and it was uh I had it um, so each wing is coloured as one of each of my daughter's birthstones and I had their names written around the tattoo, it's a meaningful tattoo. [...] Well, I wanted to do something as a dedication to my children and it's not that I needed to get a tattoo to do that because of course, you know I have them in my life um, but I just thought uh for a first tattoo that I wanted something meaningful. (Participant 1, female).

Even those who did not have children mentioned the commonality of people getting tattoos to represent their kin. "The [people at my workplace] do have deep meanings to all those little tattoos. They have the memorial tattoos or their kid's handwriting tattooed." (Participant 4, female). Similarly, people's pets can be the focal point of their memorial tattoos, as one participant mentioned his friend who had a tattoo dedicated to his pet. "I had a friend who got -- again another memorial tattoo -- for their pet." (Participant 2, male). Another participant had a tattoo that represented two of her grandparents. She had learned a lot from them and wanted to have a piece of them wherever she went:

So the thistle is for my Opa because it's the national flower of Scotland and that's where he's

from. The hummingbird is for my Oma. She loves hummingbirds so I have that for her. (Participant 4, female)

This same participant also had two different tattoos representing celebrities that she described as her heroes:

And then the Daniel Ricciardo handwriting is just because I love him, he's my hero. The story behind Max's number is me losing a bet. I made a bet with my friend Michelle at the end of last season over if Max was going to win the championship or not. While he's my favourite driver I didn't think he was going to win it so I told her that if he wins I'll go get his number tattooed on me. He won. (Participant 4, female).

One participant (P5) had somewhat of a memorial and passion tattoo, as their tattoo represented their favourite band, Pantera, but the most important meaning behind it was that it was a tribute to a member of the band who was tragically killed: And then the other one is the one on my shin which is like a tribute to a band that I really like, called Pantera, and more specifically for a guitarist. A musician who I look up to and [inspires me] who was tragically killed during a live set. And he's the reason that I picked up the guitar and take playing the guitar so seriously. (Participant 5, male)

Another participant (P4) also had a tattoo in tribute to a band she loves, Greta Van Fleet: It's part of my favourite song lyrics from Greta Van Fleet from flower power. The lyric itself is "She's many places but she's Homeward Bound." I love this song, I've always loved the song. It's actually one of my favourites and I will never skip it when it comes on when I'm in the car. (Participant 4, female). Books and poems were inspirations for the tattoos of one participant (P2). He had an excerpt from his favourite artist's poetry, as well as a tattoo that reminded him of one of his favourite books. And it is from a poem that I like a lot -- it's a William Blake poem and William Blake also does art. So there is a... like there's a script with it [the poem],

that he wrote out with paint and there's a drawing at the bottom. So I took the text from his actual writing of the poem. That's what it is. [...] The jackalope on my neck is, um. It makes me think of Watership Down, which is a book that's really important to me. (Participant 2, male)

For some people, tattoos had a certain symbolism to them. The object tattooed on one participant was just an arrow, but in it they instilled their own ideas that made it mean something to them specifically:

I decided to get these specific ones because when I look down at my arm, now that I have it, I'm reminded that no matter where I'm going or how hard everything seems to be getting, I'm on the path to going home. And then the arrow is for kind of the same reason. So the basic meaning behind the arrow tattoo is that it's showing that when life holds you back it's going to fling you forward and I honestly thought that was kind of beautiful. (Participant 4, female).

For many people, just simply having tattoos in general was a motivator. Many participants believed that getting tattoos had a positive impact on their self-image and self-esteem. There was a universal sense amongst the participants that their tattoos were a piece of who they are and displayed their interests. Their tattoos were an expression of themselves: "I think people are just trying to say, 'Hey, this is me and this is what I like', you know, and that's the kind of thing that people are showing" (Participant 4, female)

Tattoos made participants feel more confident, they got tattoos to make themselves look better and they were confident because they felt their tattoos were aesthetically pleasing. "I think that having tattoos makes me more confident. And this is because I like to show them off." (Participant 4, female). Another participant (P2) mentioned that they struggled with body image being a slimmer man and his raven tattoo is a piece that he enjoys looking at every day and makes him want to look at himself and feel more

confident when he does.

A common trend amongst participants was that after a while, their motivation to get tattoos evolved, and for most participants, their motives eventually became based on the artist and the actual appearance of their tattoos. Participant 2 felt as though people always expected some meaning or symbolism behind his tattoos when he just got them for their appearance: There's a ton of "Well why did you get that?" And it's like, well, I didn't have a big meaningful reason. I just thought it looked nice. I just like how it looks, I thought it was cool [laughs]. [...] I like how having them makes me look. Cause I can look at it every day, I love the art, I want to look at it. But it's the appreciation you have of the artwork and liking the idea of having something on you permanently. (Participant 2, male)

Participant 5 assumed this was why most people choose to get tattoos and mentioned that he started out looking for some sort of meaning behind his tattoos, but eventually just cared about the art itself: "I think most people get them to look a certain way. There is a certain point that you reach where you honestly just want to get something 'cause it's cool." (Participant 5, male).

Community & Subculture

This theme demonstrated the continued perception of the tattoo community/subculture, which persists despite the increased popularity and accessibility of tattoos in the general population. Most participants discussed a change in popularity surrounding tattoos; there was a perception that the exclusivity of having tattoos was becoming less common. Many of our participants suggested that as tattoos become more common, there is no longer a specific type of person who gets tattoos at this point. "It just seems like everybody... Everybody's got them. All different kinds of people everywhere." (Participant 3, male). Perceived reasons for this increase in popularity included accessibility, changes in fashion trends, and increased visibility. These reasons expand upon past research which

identified television as a primary driver for the rise in mainstream tattooing (Roberts, 2017; Thompson, 2019). Although our participants did not mention television, social media was touched upon. This could indicate a change in widespread media habits as our society moves increasingly online, or simply of our participants' personal media engagement. One participant noted that the rise of social media allowed the artistic diversity of tattoos to be more prominent, thus dispelling preconceived notions of what a tattoo "looks like":

Then it was kind of the experience of social media and things, you can follow different artists and see their work. For me it was a thing when I was younger I didn't have that much exposure to it [tattoos]. I didn't have Instagram growing up, it just wasn't a thing to be able to see all these artists. Then you're like, "Oh, tattoos can look like this!" [...] And that was also a part of seeing my sister get tattoos and then going and getting exposure to friends and other people I knew who said "Oh we followed this artist on Instagram or we follow their Facebook page" and it was like... Oh these all these tattoos can look like this. They can look good, they can look different. Opposed to the thing where sometimes you see your old uncle who has like. A really worn-out tattoo [laughs] and you don't think they can look... you don't know that tattoos can look different from that. (Participant 2, male)

Despite an increase in popularity, most participants spoke to the existence of a tattoo subculture outside of the mainstream. Each participant spoke about their sense of belonging within the tattoo community. Participants perceived membership in the community of "Tattooed People" as dependent on various factors: insider knowledge, visibility/quality and quantity of tattoos, awareness of cultural norms, and shared expectations between members. Thus, according to participants, getting a tattoo does not mean gaining community membership. Community belonging was discussed positively; participants described their communal experiences as friendly,

respectful, and adhering to specific standards of respect or integrity. Many participants expressed that they preferred talking about tattoos with other people who had tattoos, as there was shared understanding between members:

I would say um it's opened my eyes to the sense of like, belonging. It's kinda weird you know it's like people who drive jeeps (interviewee laughs) everybody who has a jeep honk at each other you know and people who drive motorcycles you know it's like a sense of community you know so again it's a sense of well I know how you've experienced that and I've experienced that getting a tattoo yeah so it's just a sense of understanding of one another you know (interviewee pauses: thinking about the answer) having gone down that road. (Participant 1, female). A right to privacy surrounding their tattoos was expressed as something which community members were more aware of than outsiders:

It's a conversation where you're kind of talking to someone else who's like "in the culture" [P uses air quotes for emphasis]. Or you can talk about it more like "Hey where did you go, and how long did you sit and... da da da da?" Versus sometimes if I'm talking to someone who doesn't [have tattoos], has never had a tattoo it's very... [pause] [continues] They ask questions that are very... Sometimes they're prying more than they should.

It's a different vibe to me. [...] A lot of people who don't have tattoos will ask you about them, and they want you to have this really deep meaning behind all of them. They want them to be symbolic, there's a tone of "Well why did you get that?" [...] If I did have a meaning, I don't want to get into it every time. I don't want to go into why I got this particular line of poetry or this particular animal with a stranger. But then if I brush that question off, it's the same thing as with the money [the cost of the tattoo]. You get a weird reaction. They think I'm superfluous or like I'm throwing money away. It's like I'm a weirdo if I'm not ascribing some deep sentimental meaning to every tattoo. Like I should have a good reason to get

them – a reason they think is good enough I guess. (Participant 2, male).

Participants expressed that the quality, quantity, and visibility of an individual's tattoos also influenced their perception of belonging to the subculture, mostly due to the differing experiences between people who are heavily tattooed and those who are not. Thus, the impact of tattoos on one's lived experience plays a role in determining the cultural identity of these participants:

I think it is really important to determine if this person plans to have a lot of tattoos or just one or two. If they say, oh, you know, I just want this small little thing. Then I'm going to tell them like you better think about that, right? (Participant 5, male).

For some participants, community membership involved adhering to (sometimes unspoken) mutually agreed-upon norms. Participants identified these norms as sharing of knowledge such as aftercare, safety, and quality; respect of privacy regarding symbolism behind their tattoos; mutual understanding of lived experiences; and higher standards of artistic quality:

I feel like I feel like since, uhm, having more tattoos and having more experience being tattooed and such. ..Sometimes I can get a little snobby [laughs]. Not even in a really rude way, but just in a way where it's like... I know what I like, and what I think looks good art-wise. (Participant 2, male).

Participants also spoke about the importance of forming collaborative relationships with their tattoo artists; even participants who expressed regret over their tattoos recommended building trust and rapport with future tattoo artists. Thus, the distinction between seeing the tattoo process as a one-and-done service interaction versus a deliberate collaboration between client and artist seems to be a determining factor in community membership. Tattoo artists were observed to play a part in this dynamic. Participants described the relationships between artist and client as not merely transactional, but one of mutual respect and

trust where both parties were expected to adhere to certain responsibilities. One participant expressed that tattoo artists have a professional responsibility to communicate the social risks of certain tattoos to their clientele:

I do feel like that's a level of responsibility for the artist. Some artists won't care, but other artists will have the integrity to be like, "Hey, maybe you shouldn't get your neck tattooed right away, because you're not going to be able to hide it. [...] I would think if the artist is an experienced artist, if they're someone who is very considerate, I would hope that [is] really common. (Participant 2, male).

Expectations of tattoo artists were identified as communication, client safety, proper health and sterilization practices, and willingness to collaborate. Client expectations were identified as communication, respect, and choosing artists for their artistic style. Knowledge sharing came up frequently across the interviews. Many participants expressed passing on knowledge or having it passed on to them, particularly regarding tattoo planning and living with tattoos. Sharing artists was also discussed, suggesting that many participants felt that it was important to introduce others to an artist whom they felt was trustworthy and capable of providing good work: Uhm, then it's probably nice to even talk to people who have been tattooed and hear opinions. "I like this person or I like that person", that kind of thing. Just knowing what you're going in for. (Participant 2, male).

Participants expressed the importance of sharing knowledge with those who might have less experience living with tattoos to prevent negative experiences or regret. Mutual care was highly valued, regardless of whether the other person was deemed a member of the community. This sharing of knowledge was perceived as particularly important in regard to tattoo placement and quality. Most participants expressed knowing specific placements that would bring more stigma than others, outright called "job stoppers" by one participant (Participant 2, male).

They reflected on the desire to warn others of the stigma attached to these placements:

If I had booked with someone who hadn't cautioned me against it, then I probably would have just done it, and then I probably would have regretted it. [...] If I hadn't talked it through with other people who did have tattoos, and had that discussion more, then it just might not have clicked I guess. 'Cause if no one talks about it then you just don't think about it. (Participant 2, male).

The concept of "tattooed person" versus someone "with" tattoos was repeatedly reinforced; participants perceived people with fewer and smaller tattoos as ascribing more symbolic meaning to their tattoos but as less belonging to the tattoo subculture. This perception of a divide came up frequently in interviews; "people with tattoos" were seen as less knowledgeable about tattoo culture and about the social ramifications of being visibly tattooed: You hear people talk as if they're someone who has a lot of tattoos, a lot of experience, but when you're getting [a tattoo like that], you can go anywhere and say I want this font, and I just want it to say "dreams" or whatever. You can just walk in and say who's available to do this, to copy this, in and out. And that's a much different process than vetting an artist, finding a style you like, figuring out when and how that's going to work for you. Even sitting for it. And you can hide it pretty easily too. (Participant 2, male).

This divide has been explored in previous research. Roberts (2017) found that individuals highly involved in the body modification subculture were often highly critical of casual or mainstream body modification enthusiasts based on their lack of experience, lack of insider language, and a perceived attitude that such individuals viewed body modification as "removable adornments" (p.364). Based on such ideas, these participants placed a higher community value on the visibility of a person's body modification – the less easily hidden, the more involved in the subculture one was perceived to be by other members of the in-group. Placements were

an important factor for participants in the present study as well. In addition to considering easily hidden tattoos as less relevant to the subculture, there was an implicit belief that certain styles or placements should be reserved for those who have spent time collecting tattoos:

Do I think it's a good idea for someone to go and do that on their first or second or even 3rd tattoo? Probably not, but you know if you're at the point where you're pretty heavily tattooed and a lot of them mean stuff to you. You know there's nothing wrong with peppering in some stuff. [...] I definitely would get more tattoos. (Participant 5, male).

Tattoo placements deemed most visible and significant to identity as a "Tattooed Person" were identified as face, neck, and hands. These placements were also considered the most problematic in attracting negative attention and stigmas, leading us to our final theme.

Stigma Concerns

This theme demonstrated the perceptions surrounding tattoos by society and others within the tattoo community. Participants identified generational attitudes and visible placements as contributing factors to negative views or comments. Other participants discussed how within the tattoo culture/community itself, there is a stigma against certain styles of tattoos. There was a discussion on how race and gender affect the particular stereotypes and stigmas surrounding tattoos. The appearance of the individual and the tattoo's imagery were also factors that were recognized as having negative stigmas associated with them. Participant four discussed how individuals who don't have tattoos are often curious about them, and how this factor may be uncomfortable to individuals with tattoos and may affect their willingness to disclose that they have them.

[It's] not complete strangers [that grab me], but maybe not someone who should be cozy enough to touch me either. People will be like "What's that?" [mimes tugging motion on shirt collar]. Which is fine, 'cause I

don't necessarily care, but I feel like [I would] if I was someone in a less... sorry. I don't know how to phrase this. But in an industry with a less nice clientele, basically. (Participant 2, male).

There were also discussions about having visible tattoos in a professional setting. Participant one stated that his HR representative prevented employees from displaying body modifications. Similarly, participant two noted that the placement of the tattoo and the environment were factors that would lead individuals to face stigmas or stereotypes. They may also influence clientele perceptions of the individual and their qualifications. White-collar environments were perceived as having a more negative perception of those with tattoos than blue-collar fields, such as the trades. The placement of certain tattoos may also impact the individual's professional life, they may be looked at negatively or have to prove their abilities more than individuals who don't have them. They may also face discrimination in the hiring process which was mentioned by the majority of the participants, and specific references were made by participants two, four, and five, who identified white-collar careers as less accepting overall. Participant four mentioned that the visibility of the tattoo would affect how they would be treated differently due to its noticeability: I did work at a retail job before where HR was like "We know this is super outdated. We know this is silly, but you can't have facial piercings. You can't have tattoos. And you can't have hair colour that's not natural like you can't have green hair." And even though they were like we know this is silly, that was what the HR policy said and it hadn't been updated. It was still something they followed. (Participant 2, male).

Participant one stated that the employer's age may affect their policies and perceptions of tattoos. Participant two experienced similar issues when it came to the age of individuals inquiring about their tattoos, they would make remarks that were not fitting of their character, and when presented with the meaning behind one of their tattoos, they would

receive negative reactions, specifically from what was noted as “the older generation”.

The older generation where you know they would see a yeah the Scorpio tattoo on my foot and they would you know just say like you know um oh ‘you’re a tough girl’ (interviewee laughs) and uh I’d be like no actually it’s my zodiac sign and I you know I’m a Scorpio and right away they sort of change their demeanour and their whole you know way of looking at me. So that would be the only negative experience. (Participant 1, female).

Gender, age, and race were factors that were stigmatized when having tattoos. Although many of our participants could not relate to this factor, they were aware that it could influence other individuals: Same thing with these negative tattoo stereotypes, I think that’s a similar thing, I do think it ties in with things like gender and race. I feel like unfortunately race probably does tie into stereotypes people have in an unpleasant way that I can’t comment on ‘cause I am a white person. That’s not my experience. (Participant 2, male).

Age was briefly touched on by participant three who stated that older people would look at younger individuals with tattoos differently, they would make negative remarks about how they are ruining their bodies or give them a nasty unapproving look: Older women would probably, people would smile and laugh you know think it’s cute ‘Oh she has a tattoo’ uh but yeah a younger person would be told ‘Oh what are they doing to their body’ ‘They don’t know what they are doing with their body’, sort of a negative context you know. (Participant 1, female).

Many participants stated that the individual’s appearance might cause more negative stereotypes, as the “tough” exterior of an individual may warrant more negative opinions. There are instances where individuals who appear different may have more negative experiences. For instance, participant two mentions how a man, who may be bald and has tattoos, may be viewed differently by being perceived as a gang-affiliated motorcyclist. Participant four

offered a differing opinion, stating that individuals whose tattoo imagery is intimidating may be perceived as more unapproachable or scary altogether.

I do also think it’s uh... appearance in general. People get instinctively more tense if it’s a guy with a shaved head who also has tattoos, which again is not fair, that gentleman may just be balding. He just may not like to have to style his hair every day. But I do think people will be like “Oh this guy’s head is shaved and he has a bunch of tattoos.” And even if his tattoos are innocuous, nothing scary at all going on. Or a burly bearded guy with tattoos. It’s like, oh, the beard. The big like biker stereotype. In a way that I wouldn’t get. But again, there’s a whole bunch of factors. (Participant 2, male).

There are stereotypes among individuals within the tattoo community as well. Participant two was especially vocal about his thoughts of individuals who considered themselves to have tattoos when they had simple scripts, whereas he would not consider those individuals to have a tattooed experience. The same idea was shared when participant one referred to employers sharing the same ideals about tattoos; smaller ones were deemed more acceptable in the workplace:

Yeah, I feel like probably someone who has little scripts versus someone who has sleeves or whatever... again, it might be the same situation as with my one coworker who I wouldn’t register as having tattoos at all. Maybe HR wouldn’t register that they have tattoos either. They can hide them at work. Whereas someone who has both their arms done, I’d say that person might be perceived as more of a tough person or a more of an intimidating person. And their sleeves wouldn’t even have to be art that’s actually daunting, it’s not like they’re covered in like demons or.... dragons. [Laughs]. Maybe they have two full sleeves and their full sleeves are just animals. It would still be different. (Participant 2, male).

Overall, it was clear that participants still experienced a fear of experiencing stigma due to

their tattoos. Size and visibility were discussed the most by participants when identifying factors that might influence the type of treatment an individual with tattoos might receive. Participants felt that formal professional settings were generally less likely to accept visible tattoos than other settings. They expressed that being tattooed could cause someone to be disadvantaged in terms of professional opportunities. Some participants perceived generational differences as impactful, believing that younger generations might be more accepting of tattoos, or less aware of the negative impacts of having them compared to previous generations.

Discussion

Overall, these data illustrate key aspects of the motivations and experiences of individuals who choose to get tattooed. Regarding the first research question, the Diversity of Motivators theme describes how reasons for getting tattooed vary widely from person to person and even within the individual across time. Symbolism, identity, fashion, and artistic appreciation were among the motivations identified by our participants; these findings are consistent with research from Kayiran et al. (2020), which identified symbolism, artistic expression, and medical use as motivating factors for getting tattoos. Specific symbolism mentioned by our participants included pets, loved ones, and sentimental literature. These findings are congruent with a thesis done by Elizabeth Schiffrin, who produced a more in-depth exploration of the functions that memorial tattoos serve for the bereaved (Schiffrin, 2009). Participants in the present study got tattoos to represent a hero they looked up to, a musician they loved, or another icon that speaks to them. Multiple participants attributed their tattoos to their love of a band or musical artist. This is not uncommon, as has been shown by Barron (2020), who explored the prominent personalities in the celebrity/music/media industry that appear on people's skin. The value prescribed to each of these reasons differed for everyone, and participants were conscious of the idea that no one person is likely to have an identical

motivation to someone else. These motivators represent participants' interests and can illustrate important aspects of their lives. Participants all felt that tattoos are becoming a method of self-expression, confidence, and a fashion accessory.

Regarding the second research question, the social and personal realms were most identified by our participants as being impacted by tattoos. As reflected in Community & Subculture and Stigma Concern themes, community and social stigma were key topics raised by our participants. Similar to the importance and critical nature of tattoo culture discussed by Roberts (2017), the present participants mentioned that the majority of their experiences in the tattoo community were positive and full of friendly encounters (P1 and P2) and followed an unspoken set of rules or etiquette (P2, P3, and P5). This etiquette included privacy regarding the symbolism behind tattoos (P5), the influence of tattoos on a person's cultural identity (P5), understanding of experiences, and the importance of a good artist (P2, P3 and P5). A divide between those with fewer or smaller tattoos and those with more coverage was also identified; the former being perceived as less connected to a tattoo subculture but more likely to ascribe deep significance to their tattoos.

A key finding in our research is a dissonance between surface opinions of mainstream acceptance and latent fear of discrimination is a key finding in our research. The data showed that participants often expressed that negative perceptions of tattoos are fading and more positive and accepting attitudes toward tattoos are emerging. The negative experiences shared by participants were mostly social: negative comments, invasions of privacy, and crossing of boundaries, including unwanted touching. None of the participants reported experiences that had a negative material impact on their lives, such as job loss. However, despite this overt belief in a more accepting mainstream society, the fear of discrimination and negative perceptions remained an undercurrent to the discussion. Participants often followed up positive

statements with more cautionary ones or by adding a caveat. For example, although many participants expressed a positive change in acceptance, they would go on to mention how hand, neck, or face tattoos were excluded from this acceptance. All participants stressed the importance of warning others about potential consequences associated with being tattooed, and some felt that the prevalence of tattoos has created a false sense of security for those planning to get tattooed. The covert stigma perceived by participants could potentially be more dangerous than outright negativity; participants expressed that as people begin speaking less about stigma, newcomers may be unaware that such attitudes still exist. Potential areas of discrimination were frequently brought up, including lack of job opportunities and negative social situations. Participants expressed that younger people in particular may not be aware of the risks of highly visible tattoos if “nobody talks about it” (Participant 2, male). Thus, although tattoos have gained popularity, it has not been sufficient in dispelling concerns of negative treatment. These fears were frequently linked to stereotypes of a tattooed person: bikers, aggressive or “sketchy” behaviour, working-class professions, and unprofessionalism were all identified as potential stereotypes. These stereotypes are consistent with tattoo history and past research on stigma (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Hunter, 2019; Lombroso & Lombroso, 1972). Despite these fears, none of the participants felt they would stop getting tattooed to avoid negative consequences, although these fears impacted where they chose to place their tattoos. Participants felt a strong sense of duty in looking out for others. They believed the covert nature of stigma could prevent people from making informed decisions about life as a tattooed person.

Implications

These results carry important implications for improving the social experience of people with tattoos. First, acceptance cannot be assumed simply based on the contemporary prevalence of tattoos. Many individuals still face fears of stigma

and discrimination, particularly in the workplace. Furthermore, individuals may face more challenges based on the size, visibility, and placement of their tattoos. It is important to consider that not all individuals will experience the same level of social acceptance. Second, we must consider that a mainstream desire to be accepted could obscure the reality of tattoo stigma. While outright discrimination has become less socially acceptable, these attitudes may persist in private and carry significant ramifications for those with tattoos. One participant mentioned the risk of covert discrimination: it would be difficult to prove that a recruiter’s anti-tattoo bias impacted employment outcomes after a job interview. Thus, awareness that these concerns persist in modern times may help us address these underlying negative perceptions. Finally, these results can help to improve the social experience of people with tattoos by creating more awareness around appropriate treatment and standards of politeness. Participants identified invasion of privacy and judgement as the main challenges they face in daily social interactions. Tattoos can be deeply personal to those who have them; although some may feel comfortable sharing stories behind their tattoos, this research suggests that many do not. Thus, questioning the meaning, cost, or motivation for getting a tattoo should not be considered standard etiquette in social interactions with tattooed individuals. Normalizing the right to privacy surrounding tattoos may help to reduce mistreatment from the general public.

Limitations

Some potential limitations of this study are the individuality aspect of the data and the participant sample. The data collected is strictly about the individualized experience, gathered from our small sample’s subjective perspectives. While the present research uncovered patterns of experience and preference throughout this group, others may feel differently. The participant sample was predominantly white; thus, the key findings may be influenced by the participant’s position in society. Further research

should make a concentrated effort to amplify the lived realities of other populations and investigate how being tattooed intersects with racialized experiences. Another limitation is the absence of perspective from tattoo artists, who are arguably the most immersed in the tattoo lifestyle. Future research would benefit from consulting this group, particularly with regard to understanding the current state of the tattoo subculture and community. Tattoo artists experience firsthand some of the topics discussed in the present research and may be able to give an alternative perspective to subjects like the client-tattoo relationship and expected norms between prominently tattooed individuals.

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