

TO INK OR NOT TO INK: THE MEANING OF TATTOOS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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We examine the process of getting a tattoo and its meaning among 195 tattooed and 257 non-tattooed undergraduates. Most tattooed respondents contemplate getting a tattoo for months, get a professional tattoo, can cover it easily, and like it. Respondents acquire first tattoos to represent important role transitions and as a form of identity and self-expression. Most respondents' first tattoos are obtained as a symbolic way to celebrate relationships with family and friends, to signify personal growth or spirituality, or because they just "wanted one" or want "something different." Respondents express greater positive affect toward their first tattoo if it is larger, has significant meaning and is done professionally. Among the respondents who are not tattooed, the most common reasons for not having a tattoo are concerns with the permanency of the tattoo, lack of desire for one, lack of resources such as time and money, and health concerns. The findings suggest that tattoos serve a symbolic meaning-making function that is part of the development of adult identity.

Highlights

- Tattooed college students get their first tattoo only after much consideration, and they do not regret having gotten a tattoo.
- Perceived quality and significance of the tattoo are important predictors of how much positive affect a respondent has for a first tattoo
- A majority of our tattooed respondents have at least one tattoo. One's favorite tattoo has more significant meaning, and it is larger and more expensive.
- Non-tattooed college students have refrained from getting a tattoo because of issues of permanency, lack of resources and health concerns
- For college students, tattoos are part of a meaning-making function in the formation of adult identity.

Numerous studies have found an increase in the percentage of persons who have a tattoo. In 1990, a national survey found that 3% of respondents had at least one tattoo (Armstrong & Fell, 2000). Since this time, tattoos have become increasingly popular, especially among young people. A 2012 Harris poll reported that 38% of respondents aged 30-39, 30% of those aged 25-29, and 22% of those aged 18 to 24 have one or more tattoos (Braverman, 2012). Several smaller studies indicate that about 20% of people, aged 18-25, have a tattoo (Armstrong, 2005). Recent studies with college students show similar rates (Forbes, 2001; Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007; Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008).

Currently, the demographic characteristics of tattooed persons show wide variations in gender, age, social class, race, political party and occupation (Armstrong, 1991; Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004a; Braverman, 2012). However, despite the growing diversity of people with tattoos, tattooing is not embraced by older individuals, especially those who have higher education and income levels (Adams, 2009; Bowman, 2010). Women have shown the greatest increase in tattooing (Armstrong, 1991; Braverman, 2012; DeMello, 1995; Inch & Huws, 1993; Sanders, 1991). Armstrong (1991) estimated that the number of women getting tattooed has quadrupled over the past 40 years, and now for the first time a greater percentage of women report having a tattoo than men (23% versus 19%; Braverman, 2012).

Although the extant literature on tattooing is increasing, little is known about tattooed and non-tattooed college students' behaviors, motivations and perceptions related to tattooing. College students are an especially interesting group because as graduates they will have greater socioeconomic standing and more influential occupations (Roksa & Levey, 2010) than the traditional twentieth

century consumers of tattoos who were predominantly white working-class men who often were seafarers, warriors, convicts or motorcycle gang members (Dunlop, 2012). Tattooed college students may also serve as a "bridge" between younger tattooed persons for whom tattoos are still correlated with a plethora of negative behaviors and tattooed adults for whom tattoos can represent a positive vehicle for personal expression (Irwin, 2003). Finally, for many young adults, college is the first opportunity to express oneself with a tattoo, since many of them are on their own for the first time.

Why People Get Tattoos

The reasons for obtaining a tattoo are varied. Most people with tattoos do not think of them as accounts of cultural alienation (Rooks, Roberts, & Scheltema, 2000), nor are tattoos a statement of rebellion, at least among most adults. In fact, many tattooed persons view tattoos, and other forms of body art, as a way of expressing themselves and as an attractive method of body adornment (Forbes, 2001). Additionally, the acquisition of tattoos, particularly among adults, is a planned activity that is undertaken while sober. Finally, most people report getting their tattoo done in a tattoo studio (Forbes, 2001), and most do not regret getting it (Armstrong, 1991; Braverman, 2012; Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007; Irwin, 2001).

Additional research demonstrates that women more often seek tattoos for personal decoration (Horne et al., 2007) and to feel independent (Forbes, 2001), and men more often get tattoos as a symbol of group identity (Horne et al., 2007). Among a group of adult respondents, tattooed individuals say that having their tattoo makes them feel more sexy (30%), rebellious (25%), attractive (21%), strong (21%), and spiritual (16%) (Braverman, 2012). Furthermore, having

tattooed friends significantly influences the attitudes of college students toward body art and the likelihood of being tattooed (Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004b). Similarly, other studies find that tattooed participants are more likely to have family, significant others, or close friends who are tattooed (Forbes, 2001).

Tattooed and Tattooed respondents say there is not a primary reason for getting a tattoo. Classic motivations such as boredom, deviant affiliation or rebellion remain common (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000); however, more people are becoming tattooed as a meaningful way to represent personal growth and individualism, and as a normative way of chronicling life events (Atkinson, 2003). Tattoos serve as a form of self-expression (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch, 2002; Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999) that can honor special times, persons and achievements (Armstrong et al., 2004b; Forbes, 2001; Horne et al., 2007). Furthermore, most individuals get tattooed for their own pleasure and not to impress others (Armstrong & Pace Murphy, 1997), and many respondents report they "just wanted one" or just "like the looks of it."

These findings can be interpreted via the *bodily signs approach* in which actors voluntarily select signs, including tattoos, from collections of cultural symbols that are meaningful in their social worlds (Atkinson, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Silver, Silver, Siennick & Farkas, 2011; Swidler, 1986; Willis, 1993). Tattoos become *identity markers* that allow individuals to present themselves to others according to their socially developed aesthetic tastes (Bell, 1999; Goffman, 1959), and the process of *symbolic creativity* encourages individuals to select markers from a palate of cultural signs and symbols which they use to establish and present their existence, identity, and meaning (Bell, 1999; Willis, 1993). This mechanism applies especially to young adults,

such as college students, for whom tattoos can represent significant interpersonal *role transitions*, changes in life that have important impacts on identity (Atkinson, 2003). These symbols are not limited to college students, as tattoos among older persons can also chronicle key turning points such as getting married, starting a new career, going back to school, or having their children leave home. Nevertheless, young adulthood is an especially fertile time of role transition, so it is not surprising that many college students have tattoos.

Tattoos also can be an important feature of *affect management* through which individuals attempt to overcome emotions of pain, stress, sorrow and loss--such as the death of a loved one--in an active, normative and controlled way (Atkinson, 2003). Not only can the tattoo serve as a tangible memorial, but also the physical pain of getting the tattoo can help symbolically to exorcise the emotional pain of the loss (Atkinson, 2003).

Looking and feeling different is a cultural venture that is encouraged in Western societies. Tattoos can symbolize this personal quest for individuality, as they are a normative way of personalizing and customizing the self, giving it a positive distinction (Atkinson, 2003). The increase of custom tattoos has helped to aver individuality, especially in the case of meaningful one-time life events.

These motivations can be collapsed into two main categories - internal and external - that affect the acquisition of a tattoo (Firmin, Tse, Foster & Angelini, 2012). Internal influencers, for instance, suggest that tattoos have some form of intrinsic value and serve as reminders, memorials or symbols. On the other hand, tattoos can represent the diminishing influence of parents and the growing influence of peers. Other external influences such as health concerns and social stigma can also influence the decision to become tattooed (Firmin et al, 2012).

Attitudes Regarding Tattoos

Both tattooed and non-tattooed college students agree that tattooing is mainstream and that a variety of people get tattoos (Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). In general, college students have positive images of tattooed individuals, and they are minimally concerned about being labeled a risk taker if they are/become tattooed (Armstrong et al., 2004b). Many non-tattooed adolescents say they would like to have body art (Armstrong & Pace Murphy, 1998; Benjamins et al., 2006; Dukes & Stein, 2011), and in at least one study, a majority of college students are positively disposed toward getting a tattoo in the future (Swami & Furnham, 2007). However, even as more people and increasingly diverse groups of people get tattoos, research still indicates that tattooing is often seen as a negative behavior (Armstrong, 1991; DeMello, 1995; Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004).

While both men and women college students report being tattooed at fairly equivalent rates (Forbes, 2001; Horne et al., 2007), college women have fewer tattoos, and hide them more often (Horne et al., 2007). Women tend to get tattoos on "private" and sexualized skin, such as the lower back or hip, while men are more likely to get tattoos on "public skin," such as their arms and shoulders (Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). Furthermore, young women may use tattoos to enforce rather than challenge traditional femininity, and they do so by selecting small feminine images such as flowers, celestial motifs, hearts, and butterflies (Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999). Men often use their tattoos to represent masculinity and thereby tend to select images such as dragons, reptiles, skulls and crossbones, and Tribal/Celtic insignia.

Why People Do Not Get Tattoos

Surprisingly little recent research has been conducted on why individuals *do not* get tattoos. Common concerns about tattoos are the negative appearance of the body art, the permanence of the tattoo and the fear that they will not want it when they get older, health concerns, and the prediction of disapproval of the tattoo by family and friends (Armstrong et al., 2002). Women are more likely than men to be concerned with pain, the risk of disease, and cost, while men are more likely to report religious objections to body art (Forbes, 2001). Among respondents who already have a tattoo, a common deterrent for acquiring another one is the possibility of negative reactions by significant others (Armstrong et al., 2002).

The Current Study

While overall, tattoos have been studied quite thoroughly, in this research we aim to fill a gap in the literature for a recent, thorough look at the process of acquiring tattoos among college students and the meanings behind such decisions. We describe the process of getting a tattoo, including its physical characteristics, content, and placement on the body. We examine the meanings ascribed to becoming tattooed by drawing on, and further deconstructing, Atkinson's (2003) categories of role transitions, affect management, and individual difference. In addition, we test a model of affect toward one's first tattoo because this affect can shed further light on the process of tattoo acquisition.

Many persons have more than one tattoo, and not much research has been done on additional tattoos. Therefore, we investigate the differences between one's first and one's favorite tattoo among college students who have more than one tattoo. Specifically, we compare reasons for getting them, as well as their content and significance. We also

construct a model of affect towards one's favorite tattoo. Finally, we examine characteristics of respondents who do not have tattoos and their reasons for not getting them.

Our examination of college students in particular allows us to attempt to reconcile the difference in the literature between adolescents for whom tattoos generally are correlated with delinquent and risk-taking behaviors and outcomes and adults for whom the literature is split between positive outcomes of self-expression and negative ones (Irwin, 2003). One hypothesis regarding the split in the literature is that tattoos among young adolescents may represent an *adolescence-limited* pattern of delinquency rather than a *life-course persistent* one (Moffitt 1993; Silver et al., 2011). In addition, college students may be further along in their self-authorship, a process of identity formation in which they have begun to define their own beliefs (Baxter Magolda, 2009). As such, becoming tattooed may serve as an act of symbolic creativity (Bell, 1999; Willis, 1993) that allows students to use their tattoos to communicate aspects of their personality and identity to others. Our purpose, therefore, is to examine the meanings behind tattooing and how they may serve a symbolic meaning-making function.

Method

Participants

Our respondents are 458 undergraduate students from a medium-sized public university in the western United States. Respondents range in age from 15 to 59. The mean age of the participants is 23.4 years ($SD = 6.8$ years), and the median age is 21 years. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents are women. Seventy-seven percent of our sample is white, 10% is Hispanic/Latino, 6% is bi-racial or multi-racial, 3% is African American, 3% is Asian, and 1% is Native American.

Instrument

The research involves two instruments. One instrument is completed by participants who do not have a tattoo, and the other instrument is completed by participants who have one or more tattoos. The instrument for non-tattooed participants contains three open-ended items on why they do not have tattoos and 33 closed-ended items, including the Martin Stigma Against Tattoos Survey (MSATS, Martin & Dula, 2010). The instrument for tattooed participants includes five open-ended items on why they have one or more tattoos, information on their first tattoo and favorite tattoo (if they have more than one), descriptive information about their first and favorite tattoos, and the MSATS. Both instruments contain basic demographic items. The instruments take between ten and 20 minutes to complete.

Procedures

The survey takes place during regular class hours for all undergraduate sociology classes on campus. Participants receive a packet that contains the informed consent form and the two instruments. Participants give informed consent and then complete the appropriate instrument based on their tattooed status. In some classrooms, instructors give extra credit for attendance on the day of the survey, but this credit is not dependent upon completing the questionnaire. The instructor is not present during the administration of the instrument. No students have refused to participate.

Results

Tattooed Respondents

A total of 195 (43.1%) respondents have one or more tattoos. A greater percentage of women (46.1%) have tattoos than men (36.8%), but this difference is not statistically significant.

Among the 38 respondents (19.7% of

the total) who get their first tattoo before the age of 18, eleven (71.1%) have parental permission. Among the 14 respondents who get their first tattoo while under age 18 and who have one or no family members with a tattoo 57.1 % have parental permission; among 22 respondents who have two or more family members with a tattoo, 81.8% have parental permission. While the percentage difference is large, it is not statistically significant due to the small number of cases.

Respondents who have one or more tattoos report how long they thought about getting their first tattoo. Response categories are None (Spur of the moment decision, 1), A little (a few days, 2), A moderate amount of time (a few weeks, 3), Much time (months, 4) and Very much time (a year or longer, 5). The mean response is 3.53, and the median is 4. Both measures correspond to "Much time (months)." Similar to previous studies exploring tattoo decision-making (Armstrong & Pace Murphy, 1997), we find that individuals who acquire their first tattoo while

under the age of 18 take less time to think about getting it than those who acquire their first tattoo when they are 18 or older ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.23$ and $M = 3.60, SD = 1.32$ respectively); however, this difference is not statistically significant at the .05 level. Still, almost one-third (31.2%) of those 18 or older spent "very much time" (a year or longer) on their decision while only 13.2% of those under 18 spent this much time deciding to get their first tattoo ($r = .21, p < .01$).

We ask respondents why they get their first tattoo. Drawing from Atkinson (2003), we open-code responses into eight categories reflecting role transitions, individual difference/self-distinction and affect management, and then we further classify them using the Internal and External distinction and descriptors from Firmin, Tse, Foster & Angelini (2012). Inter-rater reliability is 72%. The reasons participants give for getting their tattoos are shown in Table 1. Findings reveal that the majority of respondents obtain a tattoo for intrinsic reasons,

Table 1. Frequency and Percent of Responses to Item, "Why did you get your first tattoo?"

Category and Description	Frequency	Percent
<i>Spontaneous self-distinction</i> : means of spontaneous self-expression; Internal factor	34	17.9
<i>Connective role transition</i> : represents bonds, connections, or reminders of family or friends; Internal factor	28	14.7
<i>Inspirational self-distinction</i> : serves as a personal statement, statement of religion or spirituality, or is inspirational; Internal factor	27	14.2
<i>Aesthetic self-distinction</i> : form of aesthetic symbolism or positive self-distinction; Internal factor	25	13.2
<i>Peer-oriented role transition</i> : represents bonding experience or marks group affiliation; External factor	23	12.1
<i>Commemorative role transition</i> : reflects life event, turning point; Internal factor	14	7.4
<i>Independence role transition</i> : serves as a statement of independence or rebellion; External factor	13	6.8
<i>Affect management</i> : reminder/memorial of loved one; Internal factor	11	5.8
Other	15	7.9
Total	190	100.0

rather than extrinsic ones. Most participants report getting their first tattoo because they just "want one" or want "something new" ("spontaneous self-distinction," 17.9%). Furthermore, for many respondents, a tattoo serves to celebrate their relationships with others or as a reminder of a living loved one ("connective role transition," 14.7%), or serve as a statement of inspiration, religiosity or spirituality ("inspirational self-distinction," 14.2%). Getting a tattoo for aesthetic reasons ("aesthetic self-distinction," 13.2%) also is common.

While not as common, respondents also obtain tattoos based on external influencers. For instance, participants note getting a tattoo as a bonding experience with someone else ("peer-oriented role transition," 12.1%). Not surprisingly then, our tattooed respondents are more likely to have at least one family member with a tattoo (71%) or five or more close friends with tattoos (60%) than respondents without tattoos (42% and 38%, respectively), suggesting they have greater exposure to, and possibly encouragement from, those who are tattooed. These results are statistically significant ($V = .32, p = .001$ and $V = .22, p < .001$, respectively).

There are some subtle differences in the reasons respondents acquire a first tattoo by race/ethnicity. Due to the very small number of cases, we collapse the variable of race/ethnicity into white and non-white. Respondents who are Latino/Hispanic are classified as non-white. Non-white respondents report higher rates of obtaining a first tattoo as a form of spontaneous self-distinction (27.9%), connective role transition (20.9%) and affect management (9.3%) than white respondents (12.9%, 13.6%, and 4.3% respectively). On the other hand, white respondents are more likely to say they obtain their first tattoo for inspirational self-distinction (15.7%) or as a form of aesthetic self-distinction (15.7%) than non-white respondents (11.6% and 4.7%

respectively). These results are statistically significant at the .05 level.

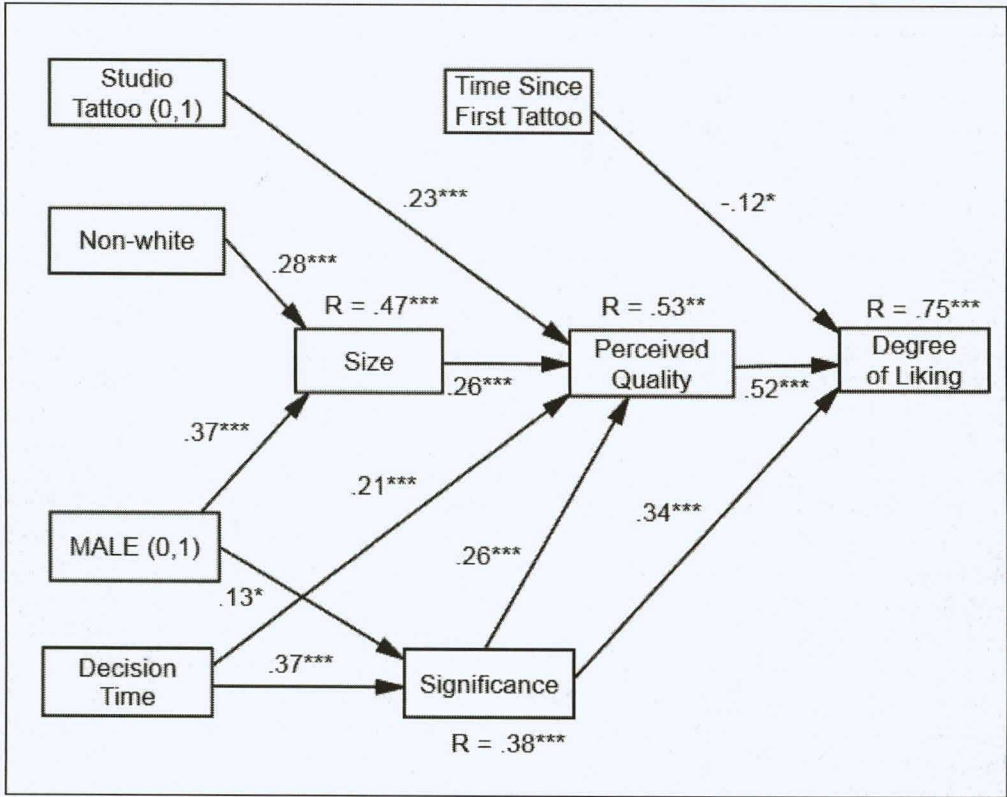
We do not find that many participants get their first tattoo as a statement of rebellion or independence ("independence role transition," 6.8%).

Respondents who have at least one tattoo use the following response categories to tell us how much significance or deep meaning the tattoo has for them: None (1), Little (2), A moderate amount (3), Much (4) and Very much (5). The mean response is 3.95 ($SD = 1.26$), and the median is 4. Both measures of central tendency correspond to "Much significance." Respondents who say their first tattoo has no significance or deep meaning ($N=11$) acquire their first tattoo either because they "like the looks of it" or "just want one" ("spontaneous self-distinction"), become 18 ("independence role transition"), think it was "cool" at the time ("aesthetic self-distinction"), or receive it as a present. On the other hand, the majority of those whose tattoos hold great significance ("very much") primarily get their tattoo to reflect connections or bonds with others ("connective role transition") or as a form of inspirational self-distinction. This relation is statistically significant ($Eta(\eta) = .49, p < .001$).

Respondents use the following response categories to tell us how much they like their first tattoo: Not at all (1), A little (2), Some (3), A great deal (4) or A very great deal (5). The mean response is 4.26 and the median is 5.00. Both measures correspond to "A great deal."

Participants reveal how big their first tattoo is by using one of the five response categories of 1) Quarter size or smaller, 2) Fist size, 3) Half-sleeve size, 4) Sleeve size, and 5) Bigger than sleeve size. The mean response is 1.98 ($SD = .81$), and the median is 2.00. Both of these measures of central tendency correspond to "Fist size." Men report larger tattoos ($M = 2.46, SD = .96$) than women ($M = 1.81, SD = .66$). This difference is statistically

Figure 1. Model of affect toward first tattoo



* = $p < .05$
 ** = $p < .01$
 *** = $p < .001$

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for variables in Figure 1.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (0,1)	.27	.45
Non-white (0,1)	.24	.43
Studio Tattoo (0,1)	.92	.27
Decision Time	3.53	1.30
Time Since First Tattoo	4.80	4.56
Size	1.98	.81
Significance	3.95	1.26
Perceived Quality	3.91	1.09
Degree of Liking	4.26	.99

Table 2. Correlations among variables in Figure 1.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Male (0,1)	—								
2. Non-white (0,1)	.01	—							
3. Studio Tattoo (0,1)	-.14*	.10	—						
4. Decision Time	-.04	-.06		—					
5. Time Since First Tattoo	-.03	-.02	-.20**	-.37***	—				
6. Size	.36***	.29***	-.10	.17*	-.12	—			
7. Significance	.11	.07	.08	.36***	-.29***	.14	—		
8. Perceived Quality	.03	.14	.24**	.36***	-.30***	.29***	.38***	—	
9. Degree of Liking	.06	.12	.18*	.39***	-.36***	.23***	.56***	.68*	—

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$.

significant ($Eta = .37$, $p < .001$). Non-white respondents get larger tattoos ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.10$) than white respondents ($M = 1.87$, $SD = .65$), and this difference is statistically significant ($Eta = .31$, $p < .001$). Gender and non-white do not interact statistically.

Respondents rate the overall quality of their first tattoo using one of the following five response categories: Poor (1), Fair (2), Good (3), Very good (4) and Excellent (5). The mean response is 3.91 ($SD = 1.09$), and the median is 4.00. Both of these measures correspond to "Very good." The perceived quality of the tattoo is correlated with size ($r = .29$, $p < .001$), cost ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), and having it done in a tattoo studio ($r = .24$, $p < .001$).

Model of Affect toward First Tattoo

In an effort to bring together several of the findings above, we construct a path model regarding how much the respondent currently likes their first tattoo. A structural equations model of affect toward one's first tattoo is shown in Figure 1 (see also Tables 1 and 2). The chi-square for the model represents the degree to which the model captures the relations in a saturated model that contains all relations among the variables. Ideally, the chi-square

(χ^2) is not statistically significant. Our $\chi^2 = 26.07$, with 15 degrees of freedom is statistically significant at the .05 level. Even though the χ^2 is statistically significant, the difference between the model to be tested and the saturated model could be trivial, so a rule of thumb is that the χ^2/df ratio can be as high as 2 or 3, and the model still could be considered to have a good fit with the data. Our χ^2/df ratio is 1.74 ($26.07/15 = 1.74$), a value that is within the accepted range. The Comparative Fit Index is a measure of the overall fit of the model. Values above .95 are considered to represent a good fit between the model and the data. The CFI for our model of .97 represents a very good fit. The RMSEA is a measure of error in the model. Values below .06 represent a good fit. The RMSEA of our model is .04.

The multiple correlation coefficient, R , is .47 ($p < .001$) for the effects of non-white racial status and male on size of the tattoo. The R is .38 ($p < .001$) for the effects of male and decision time on significance of the tattoo. The R is .53 ($p < .001$) for the effects of the four independent variables upon perceived overall quality of the tattoo ($p < .001$). The $R = .75$ ($p < .001$) for the effects of three independent variables upon the degree of liking of the tattoo by the respondent.

Subsequent Tattoos

Tattooed respondents report they have between one and 20 tattoos. Among these tattooed respondents, the mean number of tattoos is 2.63 ($SD = 2.38$), and the median is 2.00. Respondents who get their first tattoo at a younger age tend to have fewer tattoos currently ($r = -.16, p < .05$). Finally, respondents who have at least one tattoo report that they have tattoos that cover between one and 60 percent of their bodies ($M = 5.66\%$, $SD = 7.60\%$; median = 3.00%). We do not observe a statistically significant relation between gender or race/ethnicity and number of tattoos or percent of the body that is covered.

Favorite Tattoos

Among tattooed respondents, 117 (60.6%) have more than one tattoo. For 87 respondents (74.4%), their second or subsequent tattoo is their favorite. To further explore affect, we limit our analysis of one's favorite tattoo to cases in which the second or subsequent tattoo is the favorite. The average age at which an individual gets a favorite tattoo is 21.1 ($SD = 4.17$), which is approximately 2.3 years after their first tattoo. As with the first tattoo, most respondents spend between "A few weeks" and "Months" making the decision to get their favorite tattoo. Favorite tattoos are larger ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.13$) than first tattoos ($M = 1.98$, $SD = .81$) and respondents are more likely to be able to cover their first tattoo ($M = 4.51$, $SD = .79$; "Very easily") than their favorite tattoo ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.05$; "Easily"). Both of these differences are statistically significant ($\eta = .20, p < .01$ for each).

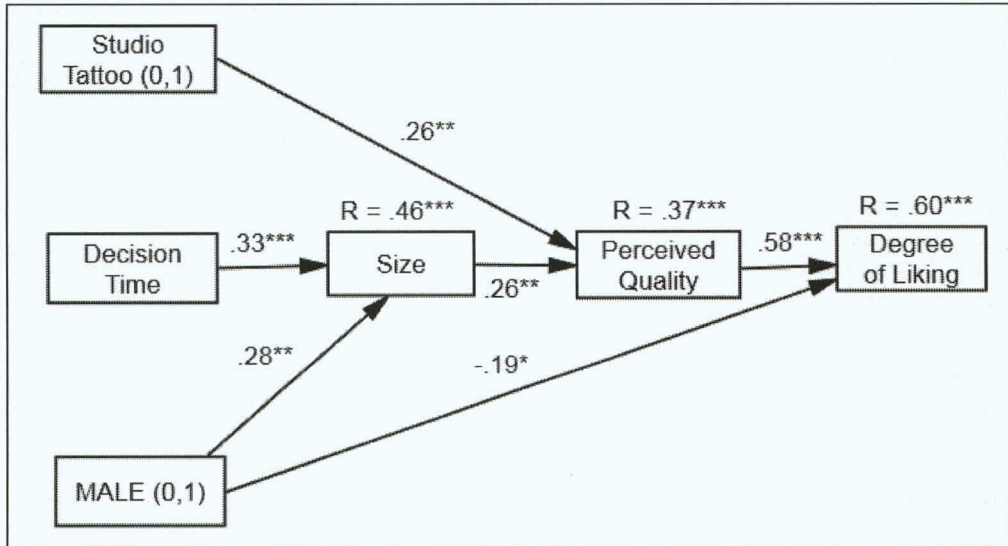
We find no statistically significant differences between first versus favorite tattoo and content or reasons for getting the tattoo. Respondents rate the significance of their favorite tattoo as higher ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.03$) than they rate their first tattoo ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.26$; $\eta = .19, p < .01$).

Approximately ninety percent of both first and favorite tattoos are done in a tattoo studio. Favorite tattoos cost more ($M = \$185$; $SD = \$226$) than first tattoos ($M = \121; $SD = \$173$). This difference is statistically significant ($\eta = .16, p = .05$). Perceived quality also is higher for favorite tattoos ($M = 4.40$; $SD = .88$) than for first tattoos ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 1.12$). This difference is statistically significant ($\eta = .23, p < .001$). Both means correspond to "Very good." Almost tautologically, respondents like their favorite tattoo more ($M = 4.71$; $SD = .48$; "A very great deal") than their first tattoo ($M = 4.26$; $SD = .93$; "A great deal"). This difference is statistically significant ($\eta = .27, p < .001$).

In Figure 2, we pull-together the variables that predict positive affect toward the favorite tattoo among respondents who have more than one tattoo (see also Tables 3 and 4). The χ^2 for the model is not significant, an indication of a good fit. The CFI is .996, and the RMSEA is .02. All three measures indicate a very good fit of the model to the data. The three multiple R coefficients are all above .37 ($p < .01$), and all regression coefficients shown on Figure 2 are statistically significant beyond the .05 level.

The results from the model show that for favorite tattoos, decision time and gender affect the size of the tattoo while size and having the tattoo done in a studio affect the perceived quality of it. Perceived quality and gender affect the degree of liking of a favorite tattoo. Unlike the results for a first tattoo, significance of the tattoo does not affect the perceived quality or the degree of liking a favorite tattoo.

Figure 2. Model of affect toward favorite tattoo



* = $p < .05$
 ** = $p < .01$
 *** = $p < .001$

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for variables in Figure 2

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (0,1)	.25	.43
Studio Tattoo (0,1)	.91	.29
Decision Time	3.52	1.33
Size	2.01	.87
Perceived Quality	3.90	1.12
Degree of Lining	4.26	.93

Table 4. Correlations among variables in Figure 2.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Male (0,1)	—					
2. Studio Tattoo (0,1)	-.15	—				
3. Decision Time	-.04	.06	—			
4. Size	.36***	-.10	.16	—		
5. Perceived Quality	.00	.26**	.28**	.28**	—	
6. Degree of Lining	.03	.19*	.26**	.21*	.67***	—

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$.

Reasons for Not Obtaining a Tattoo

A total of 257 (56.9%) respondents report not having any tattoos. Furthermore, over half of our non-tattooed respondents say they are "not likely" or "not at all likely" (23.8% and 28.9% respectively) to get a tattoo in the future. On the other hand, 22.6% report that they are likely or very likely to get a tattoo in the future. 64% of the non-tattooed respondents are female, and the average age is 23.2 years old.

Using an open ended question, respondents tell us their reasons for not obtaining a tattoo. Responses are coded into ten categories. Non-tattooed respondents report that they do not have one because of concerns of permanency (33.5%), do not like tattoos or have no desire for a tattoo (26.9%), costs in time or money for a tattoo (17.6%), disapproval from parents or others (12.4%), fear of needles and pain (12.1%), have not found a meaningful enough reason (11.3%), do not know what content they would get (10.5%), tattoos are against personal or religious beliefs (4.3%), and other reasons (8.6%).

To examine other possible concerns associated with acquiring a tattoo, we ask non-tattooed respondents how they think their parents and friends would react if they get a tattoo. The majority of respondents indicate their parents either wouldn't care (28.9%) or would disapprove of the decision to acquire one (28.1%). On the other hand, over 75% of respondents believe their friends would be supportive, would not care or would be indifferent. Thus, it appears that external factors such as health considerations, influence of peers and parents, and social stigma have important impacts upon one's decision to refrain from tattooing.

Discussion

Our purpose is to examine decisions about obtaining or not obtaining a tattoo and the meanings attached to such decisions. Our findings suggest that tattooing likely is a part of the still-emerging mainstream of young adult culture, as a large number of respondents, 43.1%, have at least one tattoo. This percentage is higher than in existing published research that shows about 20% of young adults aged 18-25 have at least one tattoo (Armstrong, 2005; Braverman, 2012). If present trends continue, the majority of college students could have at least one tattoo in the future.

Among our tattooed respondents, tattooing is not an impulsive act, but rather it is the result of a painstaking process. The majority of our respondents get their first tattoo when they are 18 or older, and they consider their decision for months. Moreover, their first tattoo is fist-size and done by a professional tattoo artist in a studio at a mean cost of over \$100. These characteristics indicate that respondents are serious about the tattoo, and they are not afraid to spend money on it and have it as a permanent, sizeable feature of their appearance.

College is a time of frequent role changes and transitions which offers many opportunities for identity exploration and the development of future goals (Arnett, 2000, 2004). It is a period of the life course where individuals balance autonomy and interdependence, search for meaning, become less constrained by the opinions of others, and pursue novel experiences before settling into the roles and responsibilities of adult life (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Erikson, 1968). Thus, some college students acquire tattoos to reflect this time of transition and these tattoos hold different meanings than they do for adolescents and for adults.

Specifically, our findings suggest that the motivations of college students for

getting tattooed reflect subscription to cultural norms, rather than an expression of rebellion or deviance, a common finding in research conducted with tattooed adolescents. Among college students, tattoos are a part of *symbolic creativity* (Willis, 1993), a process by which individuals whose lives are rich in symbols and expressions attempt creatively to establish their existence, identity, and meaning. Many tattooed participants choose to honor their family members and significant others by name, display their religious beliefs, or their association with the military, and these motivations are consistent with Atkinson's (2003) concept of embracing difference. In our research, the dominant themes of this concept are role transitions, affect management, and the concept of individual difference/self-distinction.

Role transition tattoos, such as getting tattooed to commemorate a life event or as a connective tie to family, are particularly popular among the respondents. The respondents choose to get these tattoos to symbolize life events and/or people that have an important impact on their lives and their emerging identities. Additionally, the theme of affect management is reflected in these findings, as some participants reveal getting a memorial tattoo.

Tattoos depicting the themes of affect management and role transitions represent individual and deeply personal quests to symbolize the self as it develops, and these tattoos not only symbolize, but also emphasize, individual experiences (Atkinson, 2003). Our findings reveal that college students pursue methods of distinguishing themselves from others, and they acquire tattoos that are aesthetically unique, inspirational, or allow for spontaneous self-expression. By depicting memorable and meaningful life events on their bodies, the tattooed participants make their bodies unique and different from the bodies of others. And, because the participants overwhelmingly do not get tattooed

for deviant or rebellious purposes, their tattoos can be understood as a normative method of individualizing the self. These findings suggest that respondents are involved in "meaning making" (Baxter Magolda, 2009), and this theme of seriousness is echoed in the reasons that respondents give for getting a tattoo. Even more, our respondents do not regret getting their tattoo(s), are pleased with them, and would get them again.

Our findings reveal that women are more likely to place tattoos on areas of the body that can be easily covered such as the hip, lower back, or ankle while men acquire tattoos in more public places such as the arm or chest. Designs chosen by men are usually larger than those selected by women. Design choices for women tend to be organized around "traditional" constructions of femininity (Atkinson, 2002) and include such "softer" and "personal" objects as hearts, butterflies, birds and celestial motifs (Bell, 1999: 55). These findings support previous studies which have found that women get tattooed to represent independence and individuality and to challenge the typical association between tattooing and masculinity (Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999; Forbes, 2001; Horne et al., 2007).

Findings from the structural equations model show that the degree of liking a first tattoo are directly affected by the perceived quality of the tattoo, its assigned level of significance and the time since the first tattoo. While the majority of respondents like their first tattoo a great deal, 60.6% of our tattooed respondents have at least one more tattoo. Among these respondents, their favorite tattoo has more significant meaning than the first one, and it is larger and more expensive than the first tattoo. These findings point to a process in which meaning making contributes to the self-concept, and in this process subsequent tattoos are expressions of one's emerging identity.

Despite the growing popularity of tattoos in society, the majority (56.9%) of respondents do not have tattoos. Moreover, over half of the non-tattooed respondents have no plans to get one. The primary reasons they do not have a tattoo are concerns about their permanency, lack of desire for one, and lack of resources such as time or money. External variables such as concerns over pain and fear of needles and health considerations also factor into students' decisions to refrain from tattooing.

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