



Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and Community Factors Impact on Identity Formation of People with Tattoos

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the multifaceted influences of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community factors on the identity formation process of individuals with tattoos. The study aimed to understand how personal values, beliefs, self-perception, family attitudes, peer influences, and community norms shape the decision-making process and self-expression through tattoos. Using purposive and snowball sampling, 15 participants aged 18-30 with at least one tattoo were recruited for qualitative research. The findings highlight the significant role of intrapersonal

factors, such as personal values, beliefs, and self-perception, in the decision to obtain tattoos. Interpersonal dynamics revealed the influence of family attitudes and peer encouragement on tattoo decisions. Community perceptions, stereotypes and norms significantly impacted identity formation and social interactions. Overall, the study found that intrapersonal factors were the most influential in participants' decisions to get tattoos, followed by community and interpersonal factors. The research underscores the complex interplay of these factors in shaping identity and self-expression through tattoos.

Key words: *Identity Formation, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Community, Self-Expression, Tattoos*

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing is a practice that is thousands of years old, appearing in virtually every corner of the world. Since the rise and expansion of organized nation states, it has often been subject to negative judgments, identified with a primitive cultural level, low social status, or even criminality (Buss & Hodges 2017). In contrast to the 1800s, when tattoos signified either being a criminal or deviant, people from all walks of life obtain tattoos today (Naudé et al., 2017). The enhancement of physical attractiveness through body modifications, such as tattoos is evident in a wide range of cultures (Wohlrab et al., 2009). The stigma associated with tattoos appears to still exist, despite the prevalence of tattoos in modern culture (Broussard & Harton 2017). The emerging story is one in which choosing, receiving, and wearing a tattoo can be part of living a symbolic life (Buss & Hodges, 2017).

Tattoos held several meanings for participants including connection to self, life events, relationships, and spirituality. Tattoos were closely related to some aspect of the self (82%). For

some participants the meaning changed over time (61%) (Mun et al., 2012). The presence of a visible tattoo can clearly affect the judgments that others make about the person with the tattoo (Degelman & Price, 2002). Having a tattoo could be viewed as a stigmatizing aspect based on particular social contexts, because the nature of stigma as it relates to tattooing is situational and contextually based, having a tattoo can be a potentially discrediting characteristic if discovered. The results suggest that people with body modifications are not dramatically different from other people, this is not how they are perceived by their peers who do not have body modifications (Forbes, 2001).

Interpreting consumers' stories about being tattooed will help us better understand the ways these experiences contribute to the construction of identity (Villiquette et al., 2006). Because tattooing is something which individuals voluntarily take part in, they are engaging in a potentially discrediting activity in the sense that others may or may not initially know their deviance (Dey et al., 2016). Exploring tattoos as both signifiers and performances of identity is a relatively novel idea within the communication realm, especially as it relates to the change in meaning and interpretation in space and time. It is important to understand both the immediate meaning and changing meaning of these identity signifiers and performances through both space and time (Lionberger, 2021). Just as architecture, transportation, and clothing carry signage, so too does the human body. Although tattooing is a way to construct one's body and self in one's own desired image, it is also a phenomenon that reflects cultural influences. Tattoos are visual phenomena that often evoke powerful responses—ranging from curiosity and admiration to disgust and fear (Kosut 2000). A strong connection between identity and the motivation for obtaining a tattoo, finding that self-expression (57%) and memorials (40%) were the two most common reasons for obtaining a tattoo among study participants (Alter & Muri 2019).

Hill's (2020) research, aimed to delve into the multifaceted impact of tattoos on college students. Through qualitative analysis incorporating personal narratives and observations, the study explored how tattoos influence identity construction, symbolic value, relationship navigation, decision-making processes, and attitudes and stigma associated with tattoos. The research aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how tattoos intersect with the transitional stage of emerging adulthood, shedding light on evolving cultural perceptions and practices related to tattooing among young adults.

Kalanj-Mizzi et al. (2018) study delves into the motivations and experiences of heavily tattooed individuals as tattooing gains mainstream acceptance. Results revealed overarching themes including rebellion and non-conformity, viewing the skin as a canvas for self-expression, and the role of tattoos in identity formation. Despite encountering societal stigma, participants expressed no regrets about their tattoo choices. The study highlighted common personality traits among heavily tattooed individuals and hinted at potential gender-specific motivations for acquiring tattoos.

Buss and Hodges' (2017) article explores tattoo as an expression of psyche, challenging negative stereotypes and examining the psychological motivations and experiences of tattoo wearers. It discusses the historical context of tattoos, highlighting their archetypal and symbolic significance. The qualitative study delves into themes of self-empowerment, group identification, memorialization, personal messaging, and transformation of pain into beauty as motivations for getting tattoos. The conclusion emphasizes the unique and deeply personal nature of tattoos, suggesting that they should be approached as symbolic expressions of the individual psyche rather than being generalized or pathologized. The research blends insights from a tattoo artist and a Jungian analyst, providing a nuanced understanding of tattoo art as part of living a symbolic life.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To explore and understand the multifaceted influences of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community factors on the identity formation process of individuals with tattoos.

Research Objectives

- a) To examine the intrapersonal factors contributing to the decision-making process behind obtaining tattoos, such as personal values, beliefs, and self-perception.
- b) To investigate the interpersonal dynamics involved in the identity formation of individuals with tattoos, including family attitudes and peer influences.
- c) To explore the role of community perceptions, norms, and subcultures in shaping the identity and self-expression of individuals with tattoos.
- d) To examine which among the intrapersonal, interpersonal and community factors influence the most in the self-expression of the participants through their tattoos.

Sample

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify the sample, as accounts and experiences of people with tattoos were being studied. 15 participants were recruited, all of whom had at least one tattoo, to help us to explore the factors that identity formation among these people who get tattoos. The participants were from different countries, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

Inclusion Criteria

- Must be between the age range of 18-30 years old.
- Should have a minimum of one tattoo.

Exclusion Criteria

- Not falling in the required age range.
- Not having any tattoos.
- Have only one tattoo for the sake of experience

Procedure

Purposive and snowball sampling were utilized. 15 participants were recruited. All participants in this research were above between the ages 18 years and 30 years of age. The study utilized person-to-person interviews with each participant. The participants were approached and interviewed after having given due consent. The interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were taped with due consent from the participants. Following the interview conduction, the notes were transcribed into full written accounts. The collected data was then analyzed.

Tools

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to understand and explore identity formation among the participants and the role of tattoos in the same, through detailed one-to-one interviews. The items of the questionnaires were open-ended.

DISCUSSION

A. Intrapersonal

The interviews encompassed a diverse range of perspectives, highlighting the multifaceted nature of how tattoos are perceived and experienced by different individuals.

Sense of identity and tattoos

Participants believed their tattoos reflect their overall sense of identity. The degree of this reflection varied from individual to individual. Some participants express a direct correlation between certain tattoos and key aspects of their identity. For example, one individual describes a tattoo symbolizing resilience and personal growth, aligning with their self-perception as someone who navigates challenges with determination *“what I have is like really meaningful for me like it helps me spiritually to be more connected.”*

The happy face and the sad face that guided me, you know, shows the good side of the mood spectrum. This suggests that for some, tattoos serve as visual narratives that encapsulate core aspects of their identity, serving as reminders of personal values and experiences which hold sentimental values.

“So, I think any other tattoo that I plan to get would have some sort of sentimental value to me.”

“So, everyone must like to come and ask about them. Like what it is, what does this means? What does? How does this reflect your identity? So, in that sense, I like to talk about my tattoos and then I it like, reflect a little about their personality.”

Conformity

Conformity towards social norms and perceptions led to participants not being able to use tattoos as a mode to express their identity. For some of the participants there were restrictions on using tattoos as a mode of reflecting an overall sense of identity.

“Convincing my family be like we get it.” “If things don't work out on the artistic front, then I want to be taken seriously and get like more serious claims and usually people don't tend to, you know, think someone that's professional.”

Aesthetics/spontaneous decisions

Conversely, other participants viewed their tattoos as less directly linked to their sense of self. They describe tattoos obtained for aesthetic reasons or as spontaneous decisions, lacking deep symbolic significance to their identity. However, even these participants acknowledged tattoos as expressions of personal taste, artistic appreciation, or moments in time, contributing to a nuanced understanding of identity construction through body art.

“It's not the purpose of having tattoos. That was something like, it's just the consequence.”

They emphasized that tattoos are a mode of expression rather than a reflection of identity keeping in mind how tattoo choices are influenced by the individual differences which fit in with this small part of identity. *“So, concepts can come through the client, but there's also the element from the artist as well. So, there's this sort of self-expression with both parties.”* For some participants the sole purpose of tattoos is not self-expression instead they use tattoos as a means of expressing their artistic ideas, in contrast for other tattoos act an important mode of self-expression. *“Some people put some meaning in tattoos, but I like, I just, like some sketches, pictures and it became like art.”*

Self-expression

Across the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the role of tattoos in communicating aspects of their personality, beliefs, and experiences to others. Participant views tattoos to present authenticity, combining assertiveness and nurturing qualities through their tattoo choices.

“So, it's basically talking about my resilience and the term alpha work is very misjudge this thing that alpha wolf is all about masculinity. The alphas that people talk about now, but the

real meaning behind it is that Alpha wolf always works behind the group to be protective, they don't lead by bossing them around, but in a nurturing way.”

Another saw tattoos as artwork that conveys emotions, memories, and personal stories, enriching their self-expression beyond verbal communication. *“I mean, every tattoo I think, has an individual story, you know, and individual design and individual way of putting on your body.”* The participants uniformly recognized tattoos as a form of self-expression.

One participant who was a tattoo artist, viewed tattoos as collaborative expressions between artist and client, reflecting both individual and artistic influences. *“I see a tattoo is a collaborative approach between client and artist.”* Interestingly, the importance placed on tattoos as a form of self-expression varies among participants. While some emphasize tattoos as integral to their overall expression of self, others view tattoos as one facet of a broader spectrum of self-expression, including fashion choices, hairstyles, and verbal communication. *“Tattoos like a part of my overall experience, I also like to express myself via fashion, my haircut comes into fashion.”* Another sees tattoos as artwork that conveys emotions, memories, and personal stories, enriching their self-expression beyond verbal communication. The participants uniformly recognized tattoos as a form of self-expression.

B. Interpersonal

The data showed interplay of personal values, social expectations, and the influence of family and friends on individuals' decisions to get tattoos. The decision-making process behind getting tattoos was found to be often multifaceted, influenced by various factors ranging from personal passion to social expectations.

Intrinsic Motivation

Participants expressed diverse experiences regarding the influence of their relationships with family and close friends on their tattoo decisions. Some individuals had direct or indirect exposure to tattoo culture from an early age that resulted in normalization and acted as a mode of self-expression.

“I’ve always been into tattoos since I was a kid. Like my pre-teens, like let’s say, when I was 10,11, 12.” One of them highlighted a longstanding fascination with tattoos from an early age, driven by personal interest rather than external influence from family or friends.

They also talked about how the decision to get a tattoo was an impulsive one. *“The first time it was I didn’t decide anything. It was a very spontaneous moment. It was a moment of passion.”* The decision to get tattoos came mainly from their own passion and artistic exploration. *“I used to doodle back before, when I was a kid, and I love to draw, drawing on a skin or on actual people, sort of enable that idea of getting a tattoo.”*

Influence of Relationships with Family and Friends

Some acknowledged the role of family and friends in providing a supportive environment but emphasized that the decision ultimately came from within. *“Like maybe people could encourage me further, but the idea would be mine to begin with.”*

Others acknowledged indirect influences. Two participants mentioned how familial disapproval initially fueled a rebellious desire to get tattoos. *“Me being rebellious to be fighting for, just so that I could be somebody I wanted to be, and not going by the expression of what my friends and family expected me to be.”*

While another highlighted the positive influence of friends who shared a passion for tattoo artistry. *“I never thought to make tattoos. But my good friend who was the tattoo masters in my country, he started doing tattoos and I like okay, maybe I want one.”*

Most participants talked about how peer influence/encouragement/support impacted their interest towards tattoo culture. Social influence initiated a sense of acceptance toward using tattoo as a mode of self-expression and inhibited self-expression due to different norms towards styles of tattoo and their location. *“Knowing that there is some sort of acceptance in the community that I work in, with the people that I hang out with. It did help me because before that it's always been sort of a scary thing”, “So I think as long as she liked my mom like my tattoo design it goes, it goes when if she doesn't, it'll be like, issue”*. Participants also dived into the need for clarity and courage to get the first tattoo done. They mentioned how external encouragement was required to gain clarity if they wanted tattoos to be a part of their life²⁸. *“Friend, he helped me to do first step. Because, you know, there is I think there is some edge before you do not have tattoo at all.”*

Conflicts Between Personal Values and Social Expectations

Tattoos have long been a canvas for self-expression, often intertwining personal values with societal norms and expectations. The interviews put light on the conflicts individuals faced between their personal values and societal expectations regarding tattoos. While some participants expressed a sense of liberation from societal judgments, others acknowledged the presence of subtle conflicts. One participant, working in the professional setting, mentioned concerns about professional impressions and societal perceptions of tattoos affecting job prospects and client interactions.

This conflict was particularly evident in their decision to conceal tattoos to align with professional norms, showcasing a negotiation between personal expression and social conformity.

“And I do have to kind of hide it when I do get a tattoo. So that's how it's affected me that I just must be sneaky about it. And must think about what my parents will say.”

Social perception

A sense of acknowledgement towards social perception was also present, resulting in a need to create balance between individuality and conformity with social expectations for adaptation to and resolution of conflicts. Societal stereotypes and norms often imposed constraints, leading to feelings of conflict, particularly in professional or formal settings. Participants recounted instances where they felt compelled to conceal their tattoos or navigate societal judgments, highlighting the tension between individual autonomy and societal norms.

“I value self-expression and individuality, but I also feel the weight of societal judgments and stereotypes associated with tattoos.”

Autonomy with personal values

The participants showed motivation towards challenging social norms regarding tattoos and rejected the prejudice attitude of society towards tattoos. Participants have mentioned unprofessionalism, criminality and deviance, judgments about character, religious or cultural beliefs, age, and generational differences as some of the prejudices. They embraced individuality and self-acceptance showing autonomy towards values they have regarding freedom of self-exploration and expression. *“Like then it becomes a personal choice because it's your skin and you whatever you want to get you get it, and then you got to live with it.”*

There could be a link between tattoos acting as a means of personal growth and resilience against social stigma and taboos. There is a nonchalant Attitude Towards Social Expectations alongside and acknowledgement and ownership of consequences. *“There are no social expectations for me or I'm not trying to satisfy anybody else with my tattoos.”*

Despite these conflicts, participants exhibited resilience in reconciling personal values with societal expectations. *“Confidence in my choices has helped individuals overcome the conflict.”*

C. Community

The analysis revealed that tattoos are perceived as powerful symbols of identity and belonging within social communities. Participants shared nuanced perspectives on how tattoos signify affiliation with social groups and navigate the impact of social stereotypes on self-perception.

Social interaction and Building Community

Almost all participants talked about how tattoos having was a great conversation starter leading to social interactions with like-minded people. They stated this can snowball into flourishing conversations. *“And also in today's time, like, a person has a tattoo, and people who like tattoos, or like other people who have tattoos, it can also become like a conversation starter, or like something that sparks an interest in the same direction.”*

Participants reported interactions with society made them feel excluded which led them to developing a sense of belongingness with people with tattoos. The social perception of people with tattoos has also an indirect influence on creating a sense of belonging among people with tattoos due to the feeling of exclusion from the norms of the society. Participants spoke of shared experiences, values, and interests that solidified their sense of belonging within tattooed

communities. *“There is no sense of belonging that oh, we are the outcasts of the society that we are tattooed on, or we see in a certain way.”*

Participants described instances of coming together for tattoo conventions, events, or social gatherings where bonds were strengthened, and a sense of belonging deepened. Participants spoke passionately about the mutual support, camaraderie, and unity fostered by their shared love for tattoos and the communities they represented. *“Because of these tattoos and you know, in the alt community or, you know, the LGBT community, often, this becomes a point of conversation.”*

Participants who were artists (singer, tattoo artist, producer, fine artist) noted how they made connections with people due to similar interests in artistic aspects of tattoos. Similar types of tattoo styles also influence on bringing people together in artistic social groups. These aspects help build a sense of community for some participants and for some it acted as a means of association.

Group symbolism and historical roots of Tattoos

Participants emphasized the historical roots of tattoos as symbols of identity, status, and belonging within tribes, gangs, and other social groups. This historical context highlights the enduring cultural value of tattoos in fostering a sense of community and shared identity. Some participants described how tattoos symbolize membership in specific social tribes or subcultures, representing shared beliefs, experiences, and lifestyles. The diversity of tattoo designs and meanings underscored the richness of cultural expression facilitated by tattoos.

Nowadays these symbolic representations are not prominent or intentional. *“But I think now as society has evolved, and we’ve become less tribal, less community focused,*

and they sort of, they're less like that. But I think, to a certain extent, you know, there are there are people with tattoos kind of form a bit of a subculture and a community farms."

This sense of tribe affiliation was deeply intertwined with interdependence and group values, highlighting the mutual support, camaraderie, and unity fostered by tattoos within social groups. *"All over the world, the origins of tattoos. For that reason, primarily, really, it was social hierarchy and identity within the tribe or within the group of people that we operated in."*

Social Stereotypes and Misleading perceptions

Participants reflected on the impact of social stereotypes related to tattoos on self-perception. The data revealed a complex interplay of where participants discussed encountering stereotypes such as unprofessionalism, criminality, or rebellion due to their tattoos. These stereotypes posed challenges, particularly in professional settings, family gatherings, where individuals faced judgments or limitations based on external perceptions of tattoos. *"It might also affect my chances of getting a job"*. Participants reported how stereotypes can cause misleading perceptions about the personality of individuals with tattoos. Participants also bring light on how certain types of tattoos face more challenges than others. Sleeve tattoos, face tattoos, large tattoos, tribal tattoos, demonic tattoos face more problem than religious tattoos, small tattoos, hidden tattoos. *"If it's about God or parents, it's considered okay."* *"I don't think people's attention goes on my tattoo because they are hard to see. So, it has not impacted my perception."*

Resilience and Empowerment

These stereotypes have an influence on temporary emotions and the social behavior of few individuals due to the need for conformity but not on how they perceive themselves.

Tattoos were viewed as empowering symbols of individuality, personal stories, and resilience in the face of societal judgments.

A lot of participants acknowledged the existence of stereotypes but completely rejected the idea of these stereotypes having an influence on self-perception. *“I think there shouldn't be any conflict or stereotype, something should arise from it. There should be a distinction between what you want and what the society wants.”* They brought light to the importance of alignment with personal values in their lives. They spoke of challenging stereotypes, reclaiming agency over self-representation, and embracing their tattooed identities with pride.

Table 1

Intrapersonal Theme

Themes	Percentage Of People
Sense of identity and tattoos	73.33
Conformity	33.33
Aesthetics/spontaneous decisions	46.66
Self-expression	93.33

Table 2*Interpersonal Theme*

Themes	Percentage Of People
Intrinsic motivation	66.66
Influence of Relationships with Family and Friends:	66.66
Conflicts Between Personal Values and Social Expectations:	40
Social perception:	40
Autonomy with personal values:	60

Table3*Community Theme*

Themes	Percentage Of People
Social interaction and Building community	86.67
Group symbolism and historical roots of tattoos	40
Social Stereotypes and Misleading perceptions	40
Resilience and Empowerment	66.66

The intrapersonal themes were most stated by the participants. These were followed by themes of community and lastly by interpersonal themes. This indicates that intrapersonal factors were most influential in the participants decision to get tattoos.

IMPLICATIONS

The study identifies conflicts between personal values and societal expectations regarding tattoos, alongside the resilience and empowerment exhibited by individuals in navigating these conflicts, suggesting avenues for exploring strategies for conflict resolution and empowerment. It illuminates the pivotal role of community perceptions, norms, and subcultures in sculpting the identity and self-expression of tattooed individuals, prompting inquiries into the fostering of belongingness and solidarity within tattooed communities amidst historical and cultural nuances. Furthermore, it sheds light on the implications of societal stereotypes on professional opportunities and social perceptions of tattooed individuals, advocating for further examination of these implications across various professional domains and strategies for fostering inclusivity. Lastly, it advocates for longitudinal and comparative studies to unravel the trajectories of identity formation among tattooed individuals across diverse demographics, cultural milieus, and social contexts, offering insights into the dynamic nature of identity construction through tattoos.

LIMITATIONS

The study acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration for future research endeavors. Firstly, the utilization of purposive and snowball sampling techniques might introduce selection bias, potentially favoring individuals deeply entrenched in tattoo communities

or holding strong opinions about tattoos, thus restricting the generalizability of findings. Secondly, the study's focus on participants aged 18-30 years old might overlook the perspectives of older individuals with tattoos, neglecting their unique life experiences and identity formation processes. Thirdly, relying solely on semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection may limit the depth and breadth of insights obtained, overlooking potential nuances that could be gleaned from alternative methods such as surveys, observation, or focus groups. Moreover, conducting interviews exclusively in English may exclude individuals not proficient in the language or belonging to non-English-speaking cultural backgrounds, thereby limiting the representation of diverse cultural perspectives on tattoos and identity formation.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

Future research should prioritize employing diverse sampling strategies. Conducting longitudinal studies tracking individuals with tattoos over time could offer valuable insights into the enduring effects of tattoos on identity formation and self-expression.

Comparative studies across different cultural contexts can shed light on the nuanced ways in which cultural values, norms, and perceptions influence the meaning and function of tattoos in identity construction. Integration of qualitative and quantitative method can be used to bring a holistic understanding.

CONCLUSION

Present study showed that multiple factors play a role in an individual's decision to get tattoos. Individuals' sense of self and their sense of belongingness in their society interact with one another to determine whether the individual gets a tattoo or not. The intrapersonal, interpersonal

and community factors that play a role in people deciding to get tattoos were discussed.

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