



'My body is a journal, and my tattoos are my story.'¹ - Exploring the motivations and meanings of tattoos using a multi qualitative-method approach

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Notes

¹ Details Magazine. (1993) *Johnny Depp. Behind the oddball*. United States: Kevin Martinez.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore the motivations and meanings of tattoos with the use of a multi-method approach that involves ethnographic interviewing, photo-elicitation and participatory photography. This qualitative investigation focuses on a total of six individuals, three females and three males that were recruited through purposive sampling. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to analyse interview transcripts and polytextual thematic analysis was used to analyse the images of tattoos. The results yielded five themes: Representation of relationships, aesthetic appeal and self-expression derived from interpretative phenomenological analysis and representation of the self and remembrance of life experiences were derived from polytextual thematic analysis.

KEY WORDS:	TATTOOS	PHOTO- ELICITATION	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	POLYTEXTUAL THEMATIC ANALYSIS	PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY
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BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Definitions

The term tattoo comes from the Tahitian word tatu, which means to mark something (Grief et al., 1999). Tattooing is one of many forms of deliberate body alteration, including scarification and branding, and it is arguably the oldest and most prevalent of these (Featherstone, 1999). According to Neef (2006) tattoos are defined to make the individual identifiable, authentic and different beyond comparison.

History

Physical evidence for the practice dates back from the late fourth millennium BC in Europe and tattooing has an extensive history and is well documented from various cultures in Asia, Africa and America (Caplan, 2000; Rubin, 1988). For Europeans, the concept of tattooing was predominately associated with working class members from the beginning of the 20th century (Sanders, 1989). In other societies such as Egypt, tattooing was once an incredibly sacred and respected form of art and only the prestigious were privileged to adorn their bodies in such an exaggerated fashion (Scheinfeld, 2007). The importance of tattoos, particularly in societies that lacked written language, serve a function of differentiating role and power within groups (Porcella, 2009). Tattoos were used as a visual form of communicating an individual's significance in tribes. Tattoos were used as a status symbol as a method of punishment and to distinguish slaves from free members of society (Gay and Whittington, 2002). The significance of tattoos was well established throughout its development, regardless of its varying degrees of function and purpose.

Culture

Stevenson (2009:125) defines culture as 'a sociological concept referring to how social groups are distinctive in terms of attitudes, norms and behaviours.' In all cultures, tattoos are a form of body embellishment used as a platform of human expression. However, cross-cultural comparison shows that the meaning and applications of tattoos differ significantly (Berry et al., 1992). Western culture of tattooing has occupied a perspective that it is punitive and stigmatic rather than honourable or decorative, especially compared with eastern societies, where the status of tattooing has become more widespread owing to the complexity of the aesthetics (Caplan, 2000). Being tattooed has been an important feature in ritual and tradition for religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Scheinfeld, 2007). However, this cultural universalism is limited, as believers in Christianity, Islam and Judaism have especially been unwelcoming to the use of tattoos and its purpose (Wroblewski, 2004). Within the Latino subculture, tattoos were displayed on hands represented group identity and ethnic pride (Govenar, 1988). The site of tattoos can be crucial in determining the cultural representation and this gives a basis for being tattooed (Grogan, 2008). Emphasis on tattoos are now placed on their attractiveness and marks of

individuality, particularly in the Western parts of the world (Nathanson et al., 2006).

Contemporary tattooing

The practice of tattooing has experienced a major surge in popularity, becoming increasingly prevalent across all age and social classes (Gilbert, 2001; Wohlrab et al., 2005). Poland and Holmes (2009) suggested that the body is a source of experimentation that is used to convey a transgressive identity and that this type of labelling constitutes to a representation of rebellion (Pitts, 2003). In this regard, tattooing is part of a subcultural style that may have political motivations underpinned by a negatively perceived symbol. However, tattoos have become an expression of individuality rather than about belonging to a community; they capture the essence of the self and are purely fashionable (Bengtsson et al., 2005). Tattoos have now become fixtures in mainstream culture (Handwerk, 2002); their acceptance in society can be credited to media exposure of tattooed entertainers and celebrities (Koch et al., 2010). According to Kosut (2006) the youth of this generation are being raised in a progressively tattoo-welcoming environment.

Why do people get tattooed?

Motivational investigations are essential in providing a foundation for understanding why individuals choose to embellish their bodies. Tattoos represent personal expression, individuality and creativity (Handwerk, 2002; Wohlrab et al., 2007). They can also signify biological quality, implying those who acquire tattoos are genetically strong and resilient to health risks, which can be seen as a desirable trait (Carmen et al., 2012). Furthermore, Wohlrab et al. (2007) reviewed existing literature and established ten motivational categories, some of which are discussed below.

Individuality and identity

Tattoos not only represent an idea or affiliation, but are symbolic in how they help define our identity, which is a continuing process in which the individual actively contributes to the construction of their sense of self (Jenkins, 2004). Whereas individuality is attributed to the unique tattoos people choose to adorn their body with. Within a single tattoo, there are endless interpretations and meanings and this leads to difficulty in understanding what is being communicated (Wilson, 2008). Visible tattoos of dots and playing cards were associated with inmates to represent time done in prison and that life is a gamble, respectively (DeMello, 1993). Similarly, bikers identified themselves with tattoos of death related images such as skulls and anti-social slogans, often very profane in nature (DeMello, 1995). Possession of a tattoo is often identified with aggression and impulsiveness (Lamberg, 1996) but tattoos should be seen as a desire to show individuality rather than show an affiliation of psychopathology (Prete et al., 2006). To adorn the body is perceived as enhancing one's individuality that gives a greater sense of sexual attractiveness (Antoszewski et al., 2010). Tattooed individuals have a greater need to invest in a distinctive appearance, as it is a form of personal expression that gives a

sense of authenticity (Swami et al., 2012). This has given rise to custom tattoo designs, which is often a collaboration between artist and consumer to express a unique interpretation of life experiences (Mee Mun et al., 2012).

Aesthetic appeal

Tattoos are considered a reflection of the inner self and it provides a basis for meaning and a sense of belonging (Riley and Cahill, 2005). They can be seen as a decoration of the body, an acquisition of a fashion accessory or possessing a piece of art (Millner and Eichold, 2001). The ornamentation of tattoos does not dissuade individuals despite the apparent health risks involved (Huxley and Grogan, 2005). This illustrates that the desire to look good and by extension feeling good far outweighs the risk of health complications. Research has shown that the aesthetic value of tattoos is a more prominent reason to get tattooed compared to social reasons such as peer pressure (Claes et al., 2005). Acquiring tattoos can be a practice of protection and a substitute against self-harming tendencies and lack of self-esteem. However, famous actor Johnny Depp saw no difference between marking one's self with a knife or by a professional tattoo artist (Details Magazine, 1993). Tattoos heighten the femininity of a woman, which is highly valued by men as it signifies their fecundity (Schaefer et al., 2006). Women gain a sense of greater social physique and males experience lower anxiety with the possession of tattoos (Claes et al., 2005; Swami, 2011).

Therapy

Tattoos can contain a therapeutic value to individuals who have endured life-changing experiences. Stirn et al. (2011) highlights the role of sexual abuse and the frequency of tattoos in order to overcome such traumatic experiences to overcome the feeling of alienation of their bodies. Similarly, Madfis and Arford (2013) found an individual tattooed the date on which they overdosed who had a history of drug addiction. This suggests the sharing of one's narrative can be therapeutic as it serves a constant reminder of what they have overcome, however, problems may arise when tattoos cannot serve beyond a greater symbolic representation (Madfis and Arford, 2013). Medical motivations for being tattooed are increasing as they can be used for camouflaging scars and to improve the cosmetic appearance of corneal scar (Kluger and Aldasouqi, 2013; Vassileva and Hristakieva, 2007). Therefore, tattoos can be simultaneously for decorative and therapeutic purposes; they can fulfil a lacking physicality that improves the psychological well-being of an individual. Empowerment and self-control are two concepts that play an important role in tattoo therapy such as getting nipples tattooed as part of breast reconstruction (Channel 4, 2013).

Rationale

Exploring the phenomenon of tattoos using a creative and innovative combination of ethnographic interviewing, photo-elicitation and participatory photography provides great diversity and allows data collection to be approached in a multitude of ways (Harper, 2002; Prins, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). This reflexive approach presents an opportunity to potentially discover

new insights of peoples' world and their tattoos. Data analysis will look at textual and visual data independently to this multi-method approach. The following questions will provide focus for investigation:

- 1) What means and motivations do individuals assign to their tattoos?
- 2) How can a qualitative multi-method approach help explore our understanding of the motivations behind choosing to be tattooed?
- 3) Can analysing the visual and textual data independently elicit a wider range of findings?

METHODOLOGY

Research design: Ethnography

There are two main paradigms in psychological research design; quantitative and qualitative. A qualitative approach is necessary in order to discover and interpret the motivations and meanings behind each individual's tattoos. This methodology is chosen to oppose the belief of Kerlinger, a quantitative researcher which stated, 'there's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0' (cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994:40). My chosen paradigm will give a voice to the participants, allowing them to express their unique thoughts and emotions, instead of being considered as a statistical value. Furthermore, a qualitative approach provides a platform to gain a deeper understanding and meaning of tattoos as a social phenomenon through interviewing that gives rich, detailed data followed by the attempt to link in psychological theory (Silverman, 2005; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2009). This allows the level of analysis to be specific that cannot be extrapolated to the general public and gives opportunity to engage in second-level reflection. Reflexive interpretation of the research process will be considered to be an integral feature of how I will elicit meaning to findings throughout the process of data collection and subsequent analysis (Carspecken, 1996).

Data collection methods

Ethnographic interviewing

Ethnographic interviewing will be a method of choice to collect data because it aids in the '...understanding how people create and experience their worlds through processes...' (Till, 2009:626). The ethnographic approach is particularly useful when attempting to study and observe a specific behaviour, in this case, the motives to get tattooed, as it generally provides meaningful and valuable data (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). As tattoos in contemporary society are often a personal experience, ethnographic interviewing is a great way to facilitate our understanding of the complex and subjective thoughts of each individual's perspective. Interviewing is the most optimum and extensively used

approach to gather data in qualitative research and the focus is placed upon the participants' true emotions and thoughts; this will prevent any leading questions that may have been present in a structured interview (Eatough and Smith, 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2003). This would allow an experience of participants' interpretation of tattoos, gaining an account of their life-story, which will be untainted by my own opinions as a researcher, through the removal of set questions and allowing the use of premeditated themes to set the tone of the interview, which will last up to forty-five minutes (see appendix 1).

Photo-elicitation

Harper (2002:13) defines photo-elicitation as 'the simple idea of inserting a photograph into research interview.' The use of visual images in interviews allows for additional insights that may otherwise not be revealed in non-visual interviews and help participants who lack eloquence in verbal communication (Collier, 1957; Lorenz and Kolb, 2009). Participants observing their tattoo while discussing them may have reveal information they initially may not have known themselves. The process of producing a visual image gives participants the opportunity to reflect the phenomenon being explored which enables greater implication of the research topic and minimises the power relationship between the researcher and participant as the conversation is directly about them and their specific world (Bagnoli, 2009; Guillemin and Drew, 2010). However, photo-elicitation allows for the facilitation and extension of conversation or it can be lead to new topics without unannounced pauses; therefore, developing a rapport between interviewee and interviewer becomes more natural (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002). The majority of human communication is non-verbal and thoughts and emotions frequently occur unconsciously, which can reveal information with a depth and richness available from text alone (Coulter and Zaltman, 1994; Hunting and Conroy, 2011). The utility of this method is not restrictive and has been used in various fields, including nursing (Riley and Manias, 2003) and determining ethnic identification (Gold, 1986).

Participatory photography

Within participatory photography, the participants are both photographer and interviewee (Kolb, 2008). Similar to photo-elicitation, it proves to benefit in facilitating discussion. The active involvement of deciding which photographs to use is a powerful tool in aiding the understanding of human experiences as it improves communication with the interviewer (Miller and Happell, 2006). Photographs of tattoos may provide a visually capturing experience that cannot be experienced by language alone (Hagedorn, 1996). The use of photographs in in-depth interviews inspires storytelling that illustrate features of interviewee's experience, thus, enhancing the information provided during the research process (Hagedorn, 1996). This effect is empowered by sensitive topics such as highlighting one's perception of letting go of a recently deceased love one (Kruse, 2004). Memorial tattoos are often used as an outlet for grief and this can expand our understanding of how and why (Cann, 2013). According to Prins (2010) participant photographers make themselves vulnerable and susceptible to criticism and ridiculed that can cause embarrassment, especially when photographs are used in an uncommon area of research. However, as the

nature of my study is based on a visual concept, photographs are an invaluable strategy to generate understanding of tattoos in a wider context and develop knowledge behind each individual's motive (Lorenz and Kolb, 2009). As with all research, it is of utmost importance to gain informed consent particularly when the images in question are of those taken from the body of the participants (Willig, 2013). This method overcomes this ethical challenge as the participants are actively deciding which parts of their body they wish to expose and pictures are taken in the comfort of their own environment (Wiles, et al., 2008).

Participants

A purposive approach was employed to select participants consisting of three females and three males, ranging from 21 to 27 years old. Participants were friends and the others were recruited on internet forums. A purposive selection is necessary as the inclusion criteria demanded that participants must already have tattoos, in order for this research to be conducted. A mixed gendered selection gave opportunity to establish whether any differences found were of general participant consensus or were gender dependant (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interested participants were e-mailed with a participant information sheet (see appendix 4). Participants were perceived as the expert, as it were an understanding of their specific world. I ensured previous interviews did not bias interviews yet to come and that each participant were considered unique.

Data analysis

This study performed an independent analysis of both the visual and textual data. Visual data can be seen as much of an integral part of the research process as the verbal dialogue (Bagnoli, 2009; Frith et al., 2005; Frith et al., 2011). An integration of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as described by Smith et al. (2009) and polytextual thematic analysis (PTA) as described by Gleeson (2011) was employed.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA is a method used to explore in depth how individuals understand particular situations they are experiencing and how they decipher their personal and social world (Smith, 1996). In this regard, IPA helped discover the thought process behind participants' decision of adorning their body with tattoo(s). The approach is phenomenological in that it seeks to describe the lived experience of participants allowing to understand one's view of the world (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). The use of IPA can facilitate a detailed interpretation of the experiences of tattoos that will benefit in identifying convergent and divergent themes.

The unique characteristics of individual participants is the focus of IPA, while retaining the element of searching for meaning across participants that is primarily the sole focus of thematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Schwandt, 2000). This allows the exploration of the phenomena in question to be of idiographic focus, so that particular variations are not lost. More significantly, there are two potential levels of theme development in IPA compared to

thematic analysis. The first level is phenomenological analysis that involves trying to understand participants' personal experiences of a particular event or process, their motivations and subjective perception of tattoos, rather than reducing the phenomenon to a quantifiable variable (Larkin, et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). The second level is interpretative analysis, which provides an opportunity for the researcher to tackle the data from a personal orientation (Brocki and Wearden, 2010). Analysis of data is inductive in nature, providing more flexibility and allowing interpretations to go beyond the theoretical framework when compared to thematic analysis (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Larkin et al., 2006).

Polytextual thematic analysis

Polytextual thematic analysis (PTA) refers to the analysis of visual data that examines a set of images in an attempt to capture recurring themes in the analysis both in terms of form and content. It is polytextual in the sense it assumes that visual data is based on one another (Curt, 1994; Gleeson, 2011). It is thematic as it tries to identify and categorise repetitive features or themes in the data that enables patterns to come into view (Gleeson, 2011). It has been suggested that psychologists may lack confidence in interpreting the visual. However similar skills and requirements are involved in analysing both words and images, which assumes all texts, including images are predicated on one another to create meaning (Willig, 2013). The themes are written description of visual elements that essentially follows the same key stages of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), but with the focus on images instead of written text. As such, this includes identifying themes across the whole set of visual data, describing the features of each theme and viewing the description of all themes in relation to each other (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Gleeson, 2011). The use of PTA being discussed informs the reader of the way participants decipher their past experiences making interpretation central to the analysis of data (Willig, 2013).

Analytic process

The interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim in English. The first stage of the analysis involved each transcript to be read repeatedly. After each reading, a descriptive commentary was annotated in the margin. The development of emergent themes were listed in chronological order, which was categorised into superordinate themes (Smith and Osborn, 2004). This process was repeated for each transcript until completion. The superordinate themes from each transcript was noted on a separate document to identify the most frequent overarching and individual themes. The entire process followed the method described by Smith and Osborn (2004) (see appendix 2).

The deductive approach of thematic analysis that is described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed as the themes identified are strongly related to theoretical assumptions which allows for a greater detailed analysis of the themes instead of providing a description of the overall data. I strictly followed the ten step 'recipe' as described by Gleeson (2011:320) on a total of eleven

images. The most important steps involved looking at the images repeatedly, individually, serially, in groups and also with commentary which accompanied the images, which evoked certain ideas. These initial ideas were defined as proto-themes and where a proto-theme occurred more than once, those images were grouped to identify any potential further distinctions (see appendix 3). Overall, this type of analysis was conducted on a latent level as results were based on underlying assumptions from previous literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations

The main ethical concern with my research is what will happen to the photographs taken (Close, 2007) as there is a possibility that photographs of my participants' tattoos will be published and I have made participants aware of this (see appendix 4). Protection of their identity was ensured as participants chose a pseudonym and tattoos that allowed identification was discouraged. Prior to the research process, participants were asked to sign a consent form (see appendix 5) to ensure they fully understood the nature of the study and that all information would remain confidential. The idea of withdrawal was mentioned amply and a specific date was set until their withdrawal of data became disallowed (see appendix 6). All things considered my research adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (see appendix 7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts yielded three themes and were labelled as representation of relationships, aesthetic appeal and self-expression. The following commentary outlines the findings of the study using quotations from interview transcripts.

1) *'It stays with you in a way nothing else will.'* (Transcript 1; line, 279):
Representation of relationships

The desire to represent relationships through tattoos was reiterated throughout the interviews, particularly towards people they are emotionally closest to, as James demonstrates with the tattoos on his feet (see appendix 9):

'My dad is a mailman, my mum is a secretary, so I got a mailbag and a phone to represent them.' (Transcript 2; lines, 61-62).

Tattoos can mark an important relationship in an individual's life. For instance, the deaths of friends or family members may be chronicled, with the names and dates added to special designs (Byard et al., 2014). However, the strength of existing family bonds can also be exemplified with individuals choosing tattoos that can be connected with family values (Jacobson and Luzzatto, 2004). Simon's tattoo on his back exemplifies his relationship to his mother through a design of a mythical creature (see appendix 9) and he stated '*...I wanted to represent it, carry it as a crest that can't be removed.*' (Transcript 3; lines, 7-9).

Research has found that individuals commemorate departed loved ones that involve the mixing of tattoo ink with cremation ash as it gives the wearer a sense that the deceased is a part of them (Byard, 2013). Interestingly, there is a correlation between being brought up in a broken family and possessing a tattoo (Roberts and Ryan, 2002). This idea is consistent with other literature that suggests unhappy childhoods are one of the many factors that contribute to poor decision-making skills that lead to getting tattoos, causing tattoos to be perceived as negative behaviour (Braverman, 2012; Dickson et al., 2014). However, tattoos have the potential to strengthen friendship bonds (Kuwahara, 2005) as Jane's friendship with her best friend symbolised in the form of two fishes:

'...her family is messed up and she's definitely had messed up experiences...where I felt like I had lost her...' (Transcript 1; lines, 64-65). One of the most common desires to ornament one's body is to commemorate love and friendship (Forbes, 2001; Stirn, 2007). Tattoos can be seen as the vowing of relationships, providing a sense of belonging to the people involved (Kuwahara, 2005).

2) *'It's more of a fashion thing.'* (Transcript 4; line, 3): Aesthetic appeal

Motivations for getting tattooed that concerns beauty, art and fashion can be classified under the construct of aesthetic appeal as the aforementioned factors constitute to the appeal of the physical appearance and its impact on self-perception (Milner and Eichold, 2001). Consistent with the literature review, a reason to get tattooed is to enhance one's own physical attractiveness (Wohlrab et al., 2007) and sexual attractiveness (Antoszewski et al., 2010). The idea is reflected by the following extract by Winston:

'...you get to admire an amazing piece of work on yourself and there's kind of a sex appeal to it.' (Transcript 5; lines, 152-153).

Statistics reveal that out of 400 participants, 60% of males viewed females with tattoos as attractive and 71% of the females viewed males with tattoos as attractive (Horne et al., 2007). This could explain why most of the participants possessed more than one tattoo. Furthermore, evidence suggests that tattooed females are more feminine and attractive than non-tattooed females and the increase of attractiveness could be the main motivator for females to possess tattoos (Wohlrab et al., 2009). Winston agrees with the physical appeal of tattoos, but feels tattoos aren't fully justified without meaning:

"Yeah sure, some tattoos may look amazing but when they lack a meaning, I feel they lose a bit of credibility, in my opinion at least." (Transcript 5; lines 10-11).

A lack of narrative or meaning can reduce the significance of a tattoo when they are solely for the purpose of aesthetics and a lack of deep semantic meaning for its wearer can lead to regret (Madfis and Arford, 2013). Regardless whether a meaning is present or not, evidence has shown that male physical attractiveness can be a measure of biological quality (Carmen et al., 2012).

From an evolutionary perspective, attractiveness indicates a male's quality in the sense of pathogen resistance, which can be interpreted as a display of dominance or masculinity (Wohlrab et al., 2009). Both traits are desirable and it has been suggested that males with these qualities are more disposed to tolerate the health risk of possessing tattoos, signifying their strength (Kozieł and Sitek, 2013). Interestingly, tattoos are able to express feminine personality traits through the acquisition of beauty via tattoos (Friedman, 1996; Gilligan, 1982) and this idea is demonstrated by Wendy:

'For me, I think they're beautiful, they are artful. I am naturally a shy not outgoing person. So they're kind of a conversation starter in some respects.' (Transcript 6; lines, 98-99).

'...the things that they mean to me, so that is why I kept on going and getting more.' (Transcript 6; line, 18): Self-expression

Adorning the body with tattoos is a lasting form of self-expression that can be used to capture and symbolise an individual's thoughts and feelings at a particular time in their lives. Among many of the interviewees, their tattoos can be perceived as a medium to express personal meanings as Winston explains the meaning of his tattoo, 'it represents my idea of love and relationships, like romantic ones.' (Line, 79). The idea that tattoos can be used as a way to portray a meaning or message through tattoos has been suggested that most tattooing is motivated by this (Armstrong et al., 2008). Tattoos are considered a creative form of personal expression (Shelton and Peters, 2006) and individuals use their body as a platform for exhibition (Velliquette et al., 1998). From this perspective, tattoos can be qualified as part of the performance culture and Neef (2006:227) so usefully pointed out, unlike writing or drawing on paper or on a computer screen it '...makes us aware that a tattoo, like ballet or theatre, takes the living body as its medium.'

The comparison between tattoos and writing extends further with van Dijck (2006) who indicated that they are both an act of communication that illustrates the desire to connect, either to someone, something or even to one's self. The idea of exhibition and communication is apparent with Wendy who contemplated getting her arm tattooed based on the book, *The Little Prince* as she saw the theatrical adaptation with her boyfriend to illustrate the importance of their relationship to her:

'My boyfriend and I went to see it as our first date, the play. It was adorable, it was one of our first dates anyway. The art work in the book this really pretty water colour style. I thought about maybe doing a motif from that on my other arm.' (Transcript 6; lines, 224-226).

However, questions have been raised over in what ways tattoos are used as a form of expression (Velliquette et al., 1998). Sanders (1988) explained that the explicit and implicit meanings of tattoos become a part of the individual, which is consistent with the results as participants considered tattoos as a medium to convey personal values. In addition to the expression of personal values, tattoos uniquely represent favourite personal interests such as song lyrics, books and

films (Mee Mun, et al., 2012). This is reflected in Valerie's description of the meaning of her *The Nightmare before Christmas* themed tattoo on her leg:

'...I love Christmas, so you can say it is a homage to that and it makes me feel like I will never grow up...' (Transcript 4; lines, 109-110).

PTA revealed two emergent themes, representation of the self and commemoration of life events. The following commentary outlines the findings from this analysis with the use of visual data with accompanying quotations from the interview transcripts.

Representation of the self

Tattoos like photographs are visual concepts both of which have a story behind them and tattoos are symbolic in that they can address to one's self (Mee Mun et al., 2012). Literature have suggested people see their modified bodies as a manifestation of their own identity (Preti et al., 2006) with the results of one particular study, that reported 82% of 30 participants believed tattoos were a reflection of the self (Mee Mun et al., 2012).



Figure 1: Simon's tattoo of a phoenix. It is currently in the process of removal.



Figure 2: Wendy's shoulder. The design is a stylised variant of the Arabic word gift.



Figure 3: James's tattoo is of an eye.

All three figures represent the self in various ways. For instance, figure 1 depicts an image of a phoenix, which is symbolic of Simon's new life in a different country. Research has suggested that tattoos can be understood as a creative extension of the self (Belk, 1988). However, choosing a symbol to represent the self involves a degree of risk that can ultimately lead to either satisfaction or

dissatisfaction. Patrick's decision to remove it is not due to an undesired aspect of the self as some studies would suggest (Shelton and Peters, 2006) but 'the regret with the tattoo is poor workmanship' (line, 34). Satisfaction of tattoos that represent the self is depicted in both figure 2 and 3. Wendy's depiction of the self is in the form of love 'and if you don't appreciate it you don't get to have it' (line, 7). James's tattoo of an eye is to showcase his idea of self through resistance, which is consistent with the literature (Atkinson, 2004; Laumann and Derick, 2006).

When tattoos represent of the self they can be regarded as a mark of disaffiliation with ethnographic studies showing that tattoos constitute a simulation of one's being and a projection of the inner self for others to see (Atkinson and Young, 2001; Nathanson et al., 2006).

Remembrance of life experiences

To commemorate an important moment is a vastly cited reason to obtain tattoos (Antoszewski et al., 2010; Selekman, 2003; Sierra et al., 2013).



Figure 4: Jane's ribs. Two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl are lyrics that frame the two fishes.

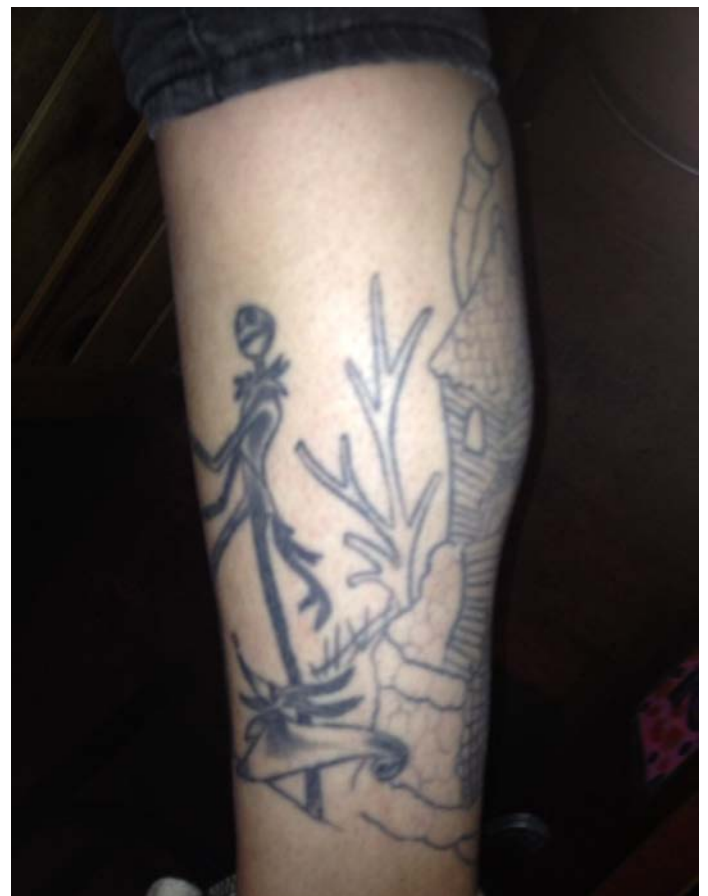


Figure 5: Valerie's leg. The nightmare before Christmas themed tattoo.

Commemorating life experiences is not uncommon, as individuals gain a sense of living and being in control of life through the skin (Okanen and Turtiainen, 2005). Tattoos act as memory maps inscribed on the flesh that allow experiences and life events to be seen on the skin (Okanen and Turtiainen, 2005). Jane's tattoo is in remembrance of the life events that occurred to herself and her friend and feels '...I need a reminder of that' (lines, 94). Similarly, Valerie pays tribute to her favourite film because '...times were easy back then, and it's a reminder of those times...' (line, 110). Life experiences can range from living alone for the first time to the development of relationships to (Kang and Jones, 2007). The latter is expressed by Winston as his tattoo is inspired by 'good and bad relationships mainly' (line, 80).

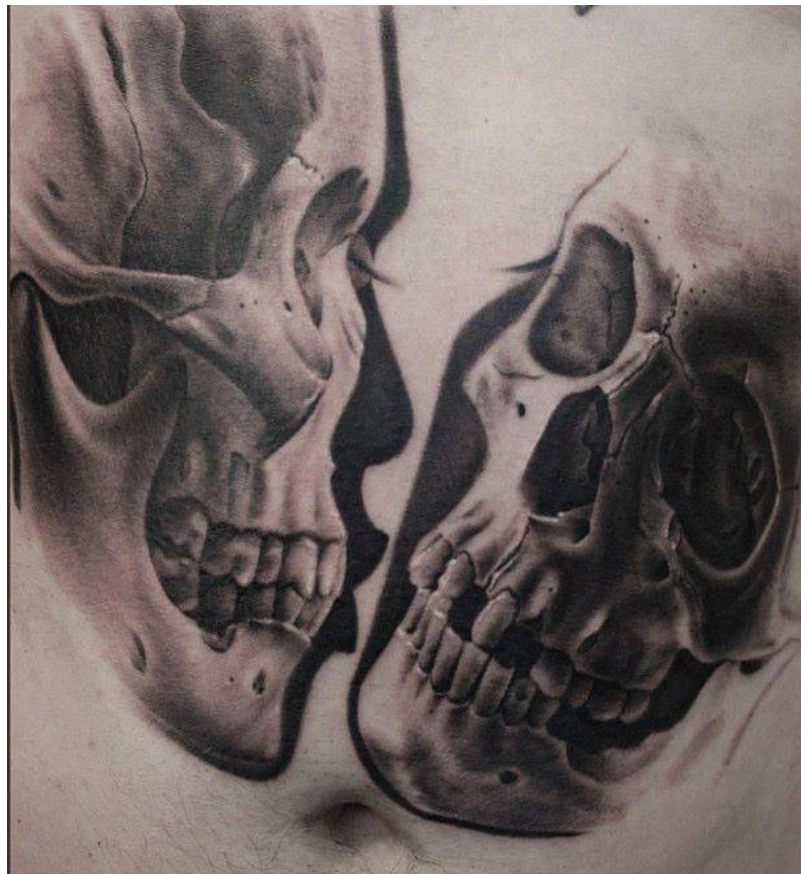


Figure 6: Winston's stomach tattoo. Two skulls fixated in a kissing motion.

The skin can be interpreted as a metaphor that is a container used project freedom of what one wishes to express on their body (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). Also, psychological and emotional healing may be represented through tattoos (Winge, 2012). Although, tattoos may have their personal benefits, the detriment of tattoos elicits a negative perception, especially in the workplace

(Dale et al., 2009). According to Resenhoeft et al. (2008) the most innocent of tattoos such as a dolphin causes as much of a negative impression as a tattoo of a dragon.

Critical evaluation

The use of an innovative, qualitative, multi-method approach can deepen our understanding of data, which can be analysed from a multitude of perspectives, making it more advantageous when compared to using a single method (Hall and Rist, 1999). Methodological triangulation is a term that refers to the use of multiple methods to acquire the most detailed data on a phenomenon (Hall and Rist, 1999) and it is particularly useful involving ethnographic methods (Biggerstaff, 2012). However, qualitative data is largely based only on interviews, with the analysis relying heavily on subjectivity, which questions the validity of findings (Collier and Elman, 2008). Ethnographic studies are also subjected to this limitation, which can be further hindered by participants intentionally presenting an ideal behaviour (Nurani, 2008). For instance, participants in study may have only discussed certain tattoos, which could have inadvertently influenced the results. Nonetheless, the advantage of ethnography research is to ‘...understand the phenomenon under study from the perspective of those being studied (Nurani, 2008:447), so the findings are more real compared to studies that manipulate variables through the use of experiments (Goodman and Kuniavsky, 2012).

To compensate for the aforementioned limitations, this study used photographs in conjunction with interviews, which elicited greater quality and more comprehensive interviews (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002). The combination of visual and textual data enhanced the picture of the topic under study and this multi-method approach acknowledged that individuals experience the world through setting, embodiment and narrative (Del Busso, 2011). Despite the apparent usefulness, there are practical considerations including those involved knowing how to use digital devices such as cameras (Gibson and Riley, 2010) and interpretations of visual data is ultimately restricted to written words (Guillemin, 2004). The study of Kunimoto (2004) suggested that visual data can alter the emotional tone of an interview, which can elicit negative emotions disrupting the flow of conversation and rapport. The application of participatory photography overcame this issue as it places emphasis on participation and agency within the research process, encouraging participants to make their own decisions about the images they wish to discuss (Mitchell et al., 2005).

Qualitative research methods tend to only utilise verbal data rather than attempt to analyse visual data itself because images are often assumed to be more ambiguous and difficult to interpret than words (Reavey and Johnson, 2008). However, interpretations that are made are not contained within specific images, instead they are drawn on the meanings with reference to other images and accompanying text (Gleeson, 2011). However, Edmondson (2013) argued that

there is value in observing images alone as it can provide unbiased insights. The analysis of verbal data is not without its flaws, as the credibility of IPA can be questioned by the interpretative element of the analysis (Biggerstaff, 2008, but it is not always necessary to include due to its speculative nature (Brocki and Wearden, 2005).

Conclusion and future research

This study contributes to the literature primarily by focusing on tattoo experiences that reveal relationships between tattoos and the motivations for obtaining them. All of the participants indicated that their tattoo(s) were a representative of their personal values, interests, relationships, experiences and ideas about the self. Individual findings reflect the idea of regret and the desire to display resistance.

This research has limitations. Some of the participants who volunteered was recruited through internet forums, which may have unintentionally presented a bias towards people who have certain personality characteristics. For instance, extroverts are more likely to volunteer for research than introverts, which meant access to participants was heavily reliant on the willingness of participants. For future research, it would be interesting for researchers to conduct longitudinal studies on how motivations for getting tattoos change over a lifespan and if meanings change with the inevitable transitions of life. Also, investigating the comparison between different cultures around the world and their reasons to have the body modified with the use of visual methods would be interesting; to highlight the potential different perceptions and impact of tattoos they have on the wearer would contribute to the literature of body modifications.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered to be an important part of qualitative research '...where researchers turn a critical gaze towards themselves.' (Finlay, 2003:3). As this research is entirely driven by a qualitative approach, it should be accepted that my personal beliefs and experiences will influence the research in some form or another; whether it be the selection of participants or the process of analysis, where emphasis is placed on subjectivity.

My choice of topic was derived from my interests in the area as I myself have tattoos. The rising popularity combined with the negative perception surrounded by body modifications have always intrigued me; inspiring me to explore why individuals choose to adorn their body in spite of this. My exploration of tattoos was not intended to portray or question the morality of tattoos nor was it to persuade readers to adopt my opinion of them. I simply wanted readers to understand the reason behind obtaining tattoos and what significance, if any they have to the bearer.

Whilst performing this research, I had no prior experience of the analysis of visual data and this led to apprehension as to how to approach this type of data. I initially was going to neglect the inclusion of images as this proved too challenging. However, with support and encouragement, it convinced me to overcome this challenge, which I ultimately considered successful. There is limited guidance as to how to analyse both textual and visual data using the same method (Gleeson, 2011), which resulted in me having to analyse the two types of data independently.

Overall, I felt that the entirety of the process was extremely challenging due to using a multi-method approach. Nonetheless, I hope I have provided a sound and accurate account of my participants' stories they so kindly shared with me and the readers of this study.

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