



“The positive effects of tattooing in relation to body image and self-esteem”

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### ABSTRACT

This study had the intention of exploring the positive effects tattooing has on an individual in relation to their body image and self-esteem. It did this by combining numerous methodological pathways such as ethnographic interviews and participatory, photographic elicitation. This study focused on six individuals, two males and four females, three of which were tattoo artists and three whom were members of the tattoo community. These individuals were selected using convenience sampling.

Narrative analysis was used with a means to analyse interview transcripts in order to tell the participants story. This resulted in three main themes being uncovered: "I was an Ugly Duckling", "You Feel More Attractive To You" and "Tattoos Are Like My Own Personal Camouflage". These themes represent the journey the individuals experienced because of tattoos and reflect how the individuals increased in terms of their self-esteem, body image and confidence.

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| KEY WORDS | TATTOO | NARRATIVE ANALYSIS | ETHNORAPHIC | SELF-ESTEEM | BODY IMAGE |
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## **Background to the Project.**

### **Definitions.**

The act of body modification constitutes “any method of permanently adorning the body” (‘the definition of body-modification,’ 2012) and refers to a list of practices that alter the appearance and form of the body (Featherstone, 1999). This list includes tattooing: a practice of marking the skin permanently by making punctures with needles and inserting inks; resulting in patterns and pictures (‘the definition of tattoo,’ 2013).

The concept of self-esteem is a sense of one's own dignity or worth and is frequently related to a respect for one's self. Reasoner and The National Association for Self-Esteem (2010) define self-esteem as “the experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness”. Similar to this, is the notion of body image: a mental representation of one's appearance (their body) based on self-observation and the reactions of others (Colman, 2008). Confidence is defined as a “feeling of self-assurance arising from an appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities” (Oxford, 2016).

### **History.**

It is believed that ancient Greece was the first culture to practice tattooing. However, Jones (2000) suggests that, in fact, the Greek people did not tattoo first; it was cultures which the Greeks referred to as “uncivilized barbarians” that were the first to practice tattooing and, because of this, the Greek people never implemented it.

However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century western culture, body modification in the form of tattoos became a “fashion” amongst all classes (Fisher, 2002). Tattoos represented a symbol of socio-cultural variation that divided those whom were tattooed from those who were not. Nonetheless, this similarity between the classes did not form a relationship between body modified individuals, as the topic and artistic technique of the modifications caused a rift that continued to separate the classes (Bradley, 2000).

In today's society, tattoos are becoming somewhat common practice. In 2008, the tattoo prevalence was estimated at 23% for the general population of 15-25 year olds (Mayers and Chiffrieller, 2008). And, even though once merely found within the population amongst prisoners or gang affiliated individuals, tattooing as a culture has extended to the mainstream population (Swami and Harris, 2012).

### **Motivations.**

There has been extensive research into an individual's motivations for body modification; most deriving motivations of: beauty, art, fashion, individuality, individual story, group association, spirituality, culture, addiction, covering a scar and increasing sexual attractiveness (Stirn et al., 2006; Tiggemann and Golder, 2006; Wohlrab et al., 2007; Antoszewski et al., 2010; Tiggemann and Hopkins, 2011; Atik and Yildirim, 2014). However, few pieces of research appear to have considered the effects on an individual after the modification occurs. What little research there is into

this area, suggests that individuals whom are modified regularly report lower levels of self-esteem (Farrow et al., 1991).

Deschesnes et al. (2006) uncovered that the practice of body modification among adolescents is predominantly implemented by individuals who are involved in a variety of illegal and deviant behaviours. Numerous studies have publicized similar findings that signify that risk-taking behaviours for instance: taking drugs, illegal actions, gambling, gang associations, rave attendance, and school absence contributed largely to the probability of adolescents modifying their body (Farrow et al., 1991; Carroll et al., 2002; Roberts and Ryan, 2002; Deschesnes et al., 2006; Nathanson et al., 2006;).

Martin (1997) argues that adolescents may use tattoos as a physical support to help them tackle their internal struggle toward gaining identity consolidation, whilst also adding to how they define and sculpt their sense of self by the use of external manipulations. This therefore suggests that adolescents use tattoos to comprehend their identity and to portray who they think they are. This perhaps means that the act of tattooing provides them with a control in which they can define their own body image whilst improving their self-esteem because they are 'boldly' and permanently showing who they think they are, for the world to see.

Coinciding with this, Stirn and Hinz (2008) uncovered that due to the accessibility of tattoos and other forms of body modifications that in fact individuals may exploit them as "a convenient means to either realise psychopathological inclinations, such as self-injury, or to overcome psychological traumas" (Stirn and Hinz, 2008:332). This, in other words, means that individuals use tattooing as a form of therapy as it provides them with the control they need in order to not perform self-injury behaviours or act as an alternative. In fact, Masters (2015) proposed that temporary tattoos are a viable alternative to self-injury.

### **Contemporary Research.**

In 2007, Manuel and Sheehan discovered that individuals were inclined to place their tattoos on more private areas of skin and only a scarce amount selected moderately visible skin. However, these modified individuals recorded higher levels of autonomy and consequently considered themselves unrestricted and independent. Tiggemann and Golder (2006) proposed that individuals with tattoos have a higher need for uniqueness in order to express one's self but individuals with body modifications do not differ in their appearance investment to that of the unmodified individuals; meaning that they care equally about their appearance to your 'everyday' individual. Therefore, it is theorised that this need for uniqueness is not an outcome of body modification; it is simply a motivation.

The works of Swami (2011), however, found that, amongst his eighty-two participants, individuals who obtained a tattoo for the first time resulted in a significant, general enhancement in reported self-esteem amid both men and women alike. This effect increased as time passed; showing not just an immediate boost in self-esteem, but a lasting effect. This therefore denotes the potentially long-lasting positive influence obtaining a tattoo can have upon an individual's sense of self.

Whereas, in the work of Koch et al. (2015) the findings were similar in that they uncovered that female individuals whom had four or more tattoos had substantially elevated levels of self-esteem; compared to individuals with less than four tattoos. It was also discovered that the individuals with four or more tattoos had amplified levels of depression and an increase regarding previous suicide attempts; in comparison to those with less than four tattoos.

Pajor et al. (2015) similarly found that bodily-modified individuals had heightened self-esteem. Yet, they also uncovered that those individuals with body modifications showed fewer signs and symptoms in regards to social impairment and sleep disorders which would not be expected if Koch et al.'s (2015) work were to be true. Evidence on the psychological state and types of individuals who obtain tattoos varies greatly in today's society. Thus, each individual who obtains a tattoo may be just as varied, however it is clear across studies that tattoos have the possibility to elevate one's self-esteem.

Mun et al. (2012) found that 82% of their qualitatively analysed participants closely related their body modifications to an aspect of their 'self' and that, in fact, gaining a tattoo changed the participants views on themselves. Mun noted that 30% of her participants stated that, tattoos had significantly improved their confidence, sense of empowerment and changed their self-perceptions. One participant suggested her modification had been a "life changing experience" in a positive way as she felt she had finally gained control of her life.

Burke et al. (2016) noted a significant and positive impact that tattooing, in particular areola re-pigmentation and three-dimensional nipple tattoo procedures, can have on women in terms of their body image, self-esteem and quality of life. Although this piece of research is related to women whom have lost their breast(s) to breast cancer, it illustrates some of the positive effects individuals can experience through being tattooed.

There have been investigations into the perceptions others have towards individuals who modify their body. Swami and Furnham (2007) uncovered that women whom are tattooed are rated as significantly less attractive and are believed to be promiscuous and heavy drinkers when compared to those who are not tattooed. This was discovered despite the fact that, in this piece of research, individuals were presented with line drawings. These negative perceptions increased when the number of tattoos in the images had increased. Research by Zestcott et al. (2015) uncovered that individuals have negative implicit attitudes towards those individuals whom have visible tattoos such as neck tattoos. These studies show a very negative perception towards individuals who modify their bodies, despite the literature that shows that individuals modify their bodies in order to gain self-esteem and confidence in their body image.

Some of these negative perceptions may be embedded by some truth, however, as it has been uncovered that tattooed individuals have significantly increased levels in regards to their reactive rebellion, anger, and spoken aggression compared to those individuals whom were not tattooed (Swami et al., 2015). However, this is contradictory to the research which suggests that, although it is believed that individuals who obtain tattoos are different; actually "tattooed and non-tattooed adults are more similar than different" (Swami et al., 2016:43). It has even been

argued that the modern day adoption of tattooing by the general population is in fact “eroding differences between tattooed and non-tattooed adults” (Swami et al., 2015:151)

### **Rationale.**

Researchers habitually debate whether body modifications are an indication of an individual’s own “disgust for their flesh” and reveal the owners to have a “loathing for their body” (Featherstone, 1999) as the act of tattooing is believed to be a “form of self-mutilation” (Harry M.D, 1987). This would contest that an individual with body modifications lacks considerably in self-esteem. However, the individuals with the body modifications often see them as “obtaining a piece of art” (Wohlrab et al., 2007). The question is: does this mean that when obtaining a modification, their mental representation of their body must change in order to incorporate their new artwork and therefore their body image would change?

The existing collection of research suggests that the tattooing experience is subjective and therefore there is a need for it to be further investigated. As virtually all of the present studies use a quantitative approach and any which use a qualitative methodology have not investigated into the specific area of the effects tattooing has on self-esteem and body image. Therefore, it would be a valuable asset to the literature to provide a more personal and information rich approach that is of a qualitative nature in its inquiry. Portraying beneficial effects of tattooing could contest the current negative preconceptions.

### **Research Aims and Objectives.**

The main aim of this research was to uncover what individuals believe to be the effects of modifying their body with the practice of body modification; namely tattooing. This research also aimed to investigate if tattooing does have any effect at all; whether gaining a tattoo has any beneficial effects upon the individuals. Additionally, if tattooing does have an effect, whether the individuals’ own portrayal of their self, their body image and/or their self-esteem are affected in particular.

The objective of this study was to investigate these aims whilst depicting, in a narrative manner, the participants’ individual portrayal of the particular journey that they have forgone through the process of modifying one’s body. The main objective of this study was to investigate these aims using a multi-methodological approach and then analyse the data with narrative analysis to portraying the participant’s story.

### **Research Questions.**

This study had a variety of research questions in which to investigate by the use of participant interviews. The leading research question was “Does tattooing have any impact upon an individual?” as this is an open question in order to determine if tattooing affected individuals in any way.

The research also intended to answer the questions “Does body modification, specifically tattooing, have any beneficial effects upon an individual’s sense of self-esteem?” and, “Does tattooing have any impact upon the way an individual perceive themselves in relation to their body image?” This is as these are specific to the areas

of effect this research was particularly interested in and aimed to discover more knowledge in those regions of tattooing.

### **Methodological Path.**

#### **Research design.**

The selected design for this study is a multi-qualitative methodology: that of an ethnographic, semi-structured interview with a photographic elicitation element. A qualitative design was selected for this piece of research as it adopts a more individual-centred and holistic approach to understanding behaviour and recognises that participants' experiences are subjective allowed the researcher to tell each individual's story (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Langdrige, 2004:15). A qualitative method is often used when the meaning of something needs to be uncovered, particularly that of an experience, and not statistically analysed (Shields and Twycross, 2003). However, this does mean the findings cannot be generalised. For this particular piece of exploration, it was preferable to have a qualitative over a quantitative approach to allow a more profound understanding of the effect tattooing has upon the participants with the opportunity to uncover richer data (Patton, 2002).

An ethnographic approach was also selected as ethnographies intend to define a culture and this type of research is fundamental in understanding an alternate lifestyle from the existing viewpoint (Spradley, 1979). The ethnographic method is considered a qualitative process for the collection of data involving the investigation into an individual's behaviour and their speech (Aronson, 1992; Herbert, 2000). This study was ethnographic by interviewing the participants in the environment of a tattoo studio in which, the participants were either being tattooed or in fact tattooing the researcher whilst being interviewed. The ethnographic element allowed the researcher to induce memories and emotions surrounding the subject of tattooing. This is because there is a crucially important connection between places and memories as some say "it would be very difficult to describe the event if one did not imagine the place" (Halbwachs, 1997:230). Consequently, placing the participant within the environment in which they have a memory of being tattooed, facilitated the interview.

The semi-structured interview was the researcher's main method of obtaining information. This is because the fundamental reason for conducting an interview is a need to understand the experiences individuals have and how the individuals make sense of it (Seidman, 2013). According to Rabionet (2011) interviews provide a powerful tool that can capture the ways people understand and explain their experiences, but are also changeable to adapt to the persons individual needs. Interviewing is a method of obtaining insight into significant social issue by understanding the experiences of those whose lives have been influenced by them (Seidman, 2013). This method was deemed suitable for this study as there is a need to understand the effects tattooing has on an individual.

Semi-structured interviews were specifically selected as the method of interviewing as it allowed the researcher to restrict the interview areas to the ones that are of interest, but allowed the participants to tell their story (Rabionet, 2011). The semi-structured interview was decided upon as the most effective way of eliciting rich data from the participants as it provided open-ended questions where the participant

could recall their experiences (Rabionet, 2011). Semi-structured interviews do this whilst allowing the researcher to guide the interview in the direction of the research and to add questions if the participants stated something that the researcher would like to elicit further information about.

Photographic elicitation is an additional element to the research as it allowed the researcher to use photographs to induce a response, help the participant recall memories and, divulge into participants' attitudes, views, beliefs, and meanings (Meo, 2010). The photographs provided also stimulation for conversation topics whilst acting as visual stimuli that evokes information, memories and emotions (Harper, 2002). The participants in a participatory photography element supplied the photographs where the participants were asked to supply images of their own tattoos and images of them from prior to being tattooed in order to elicit feeling and further information. If the participants did not wish to take part in this element of the research, it was not necessary.

### **Researcher.**

The researcher, as an individual, is part of the group being studied and therefore this research echoes ethnographic research known as 'participant as observer'. Thus meaning, the researcher is from a similar background to the participant already and could effortlessly be a suitable participant in different circumstances (Langdrige and Hagger-Johnson, 2013). Although this piece of research is not an observation, the interview was facilitated by the researcher being a part of the tattooed community and previously at the acquaintance of the participants. This community feeling helped to build rapport with the participants without manipulating them (Silverman, 2006).

### **Participants.**

The participants for this study were chosen using a convenience sample as the researcher is a member of the tattoo community and to reduce cost (Brady, 2013; Denscombe, 2014). A variety of participants were contacted via invitation letters (see appendix 1) which lightly informed them about the study and what it entailed. Attached was a participant information sheet (see appendix 2) providing the participants with the full information on what the study entailed. The participants consisted of six bodily-modified individuals.

### **Data collection method.**

The participants, once they agreed to take part, were then contacted in order to arrange a time and date which was accessible to both parties. The date was either a date in which either the participant was being tattooed or, in the case of the participant being a tattoo artist, a date and time in which the participant could tattoo the researcher for the interview to commence. This research was conducted in a tattoo studio in an attempt to reconstruct a situation in which the individuals would naturally talk to one another about tattoos for the interview to both obtain the most information from the participants and for the interview to be as naturalistic as possible (Taylor et al., 2015). Once the time and date had been set, the researcher told a third party as to their whereabouts in order to ensure the researcher's security.

When it came to the interview date, the researcher provided the participant with a consent form (see appendix 3) in order to ensure the participants fully understood what the study entailed and that they had the right to withdraw or stop the interview at any point. Once this had been ensured and the consent form had been signed, the interview began. The interview followed an interview schedule (see appendix 4) that had been pre-determined and ethically approved. However, if the participant mentioned anything of interest or offered up to the researcher images that they had been asked to provide if they did so wish, the researcher retained the right to ask further questions in order to elicit further, richer data off the participants.

Once the interviews were completed, the participant was then provided with a debrief sheet (see appendix 5) and the researcher ensured that the participants was returned to sound mind and provided with counselling service numbers if they required.

### **Data analysis.**

The interviews for the study were analysed using the narrative analysis method. This method of analysis is concerned with individuals' life stories (Langdrige, 2004:317) and was selected specifically as it is "through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (Somers, 1994). Narratives are commonly considered as the stories that we use with the intention of ordering significant events across a period and are used to structure the interpretation of these significant events to apply meaning to these experiences of the storyteller (Stephens and Breheny, 2013). Narrative analysis was selected, as it is concerned with individuals' life stories (Langdrige, 2004:317) and this study aimed to uncover how individuals change over time due to the effects of gaining tattoos.

In order to analyse the data effectively, Fraser's (2004) steps for narrative analysis were employed. Fraser (2004) stated in order to conduct a narrative analysis; one should undergo seven phases. Phase One entails hearing the interviews over again to experience the emotions of the participants. Phase Two involves transcribing the interview to see the uncontaminated script of what was said. For this study, the interviews were transcribed in the verbatim style of Poland (2002). Phase Three involves interpreting individual transcripts in order to find common themes within each (see appendix 6). Phase Four consists of scanning across the different experiences of the participants. Phase Five requires the researcher to identify the prevailing discourses in the transcript in order to understand the story. Phase Six requires uncovering the similarities and differences between the participants and their individual experiences (see appendix 7). And, finally, Phase Seven consists of the researcher threading together the stories in order to form an academic analysis. Through these themes, each participant's narrative story was decoded using past events. These narrative stories are key to this research as it is how the researcher determined the effects tattooing has had upon each individual; in particular the effect it has had upon the individual's self-esteem and body image.

### **Ethical Considerations and Risk Assessment.**

This study has been scrutinised and approved by Manchester Metropolitan University via their Application for Ethics Approval Form (see appendix 8) which is

approved by The British Psychological Society (*The BPS*, 2012). This was done in order to protect both participant and researcher from harm and to ensure that the study is ethically viable.

For this study in particular, the participants were obtained opportunistically and all were consenting adults of sound mind and are not considered 'vulnerable'. However, participants were still protected; they had the right to withdraw at any time and could do so by contacting the researcher at the email address provided at any point until March 2016, when the study is complete. This email address also worked to contact the researcher to receive the results of the study or ask questions.

To ensure no participants were deceived, participants were provided with a consent form describing the study's research aims, what the study entailed and then were asked to sign; acknowledging their understanding. For this study, the participants were recapping experiences, feelings, and the researchers were not causing an effect; no harm should have come to the participants. However, should the participant become distressed; the interview would be terminated. Nothing was provided to the participants (for instance food or water) as an inducement.

During the interview, if identifying information was provided, it was rectified in the transcripts. This was done by use of pseudonyms and changing identifiers. All data collected was kept under password lock and audio recordings were destroyed once transcribed. Although data provided by participants is anonymous, it could not be confidential as it is in this report and possibly published. Nonetheless, any information is untraceable. The photographic images the participants provided are edited so that no identifiers are shown.

As the researcher was working alone, all interviews were conducted in a familiar place so no purposeful harm came to them. A third party was alerted to the location and time of the interview for safety and security reasons.

Participants were debriefed after the interview was conducted, asked if they were feeling of sound mind, and if they would like to ask any further questions to ensure their state of mind is back to the way it was when they entered.

### **Analysis and Discussion.**

The interviews for this study took place in tattoo studios in which the participant selected as either they worked in the studio or they were being tattooed there. The location therefore influenced when the interviews were to take place.

The interviews for this study, although semi-structured, began with questions regarding their first tattoo, its affect upon them with reference to before they had their first tattoo. From these questions, the first core topic emerged:

#### **“I was an Ugly Duckling”.**

It appeared that prior to obtaining a tattoo, all the participants exhibited a negative body image and low levels of self-esteem and self-worth. Wade and Merlin both seemed to experience being bullied from a young age. The following statements

Figure 1: Merlin's Tattoo.



were made when the individuals were asked questions surrounding their feelings towards their body prior to obtaining their first tattoo.

“I had some real issues at high school with bullying and body image [...] I wasn't like the happiest with my body” (Wade, lines 12-13).

“I was always picked on, I fucking was. [...] I had er... confidence issues” (Merlin, 12-13).

These responses illustrate the issues participants have with their body and a significant event in their life in which they hold responsible for their body image. This relates to the works of Stirn and Hinz (2008) and Masters (2015) which uncovered that individuals often use tattoos to overcome psychological traumas; using tattooing as a form of therapy as it provides them an alternative to self-injury behaviours. This raises the prospect that the participants used tattoos as a form of therapy in order to resolve their body issues that stemmed from their experience of being bullied.

However, aside from being bullied, it was a consensus that each participant had their own body image and self-esteem issues that they had encountered from a young age. This is illustrated via the following quotations.

“I was an ugly duckling” (Alabama, 8)

“I have always been self-conscious over my body” (Alabama, 12)

“My pre tattooed body [...] just didn't work for me, I felt uncomfortable in my own skin, I felt ugly and an eye sore” (Olive, 114-115).

“I've always struggled with body image” (Arwen, 13).

These statements represent the prior issues the participants have had with their body and how their body before being tattooed was not a suitable fit for them. In the past, it has been suggested that modifying one's body implies that the individual loathes their own body (Featherstone, 1999). The previous responses suggest that prior to obtaining a tattoo the individuals did indeed dislike themselves and, in particular, their body. However, these statements are but a reflection of the individuals prior to obtaining their tattoos and not at present.

It came across that prior to obtaining tattoos, the participants perceived themselves as 'bare', 'blank' and 'plain'. This can both be construed as either the individuals' want from a young age for tattoos or a current reflection of how they now see their old bodies. This feeling of being uncovered is illustrated by the following statements.

“I was given a pretty plain, boring room that got a bit dishevelled with time but like now I've got tattoos, it's like I decorated the room a bit. It's a slow process, but I'm getting there bit by bit.” (Wade, 243-245).

“I’ve always felt really bare and it’s felt really strange, I didn’t feel like me yet” (Arwen, 148-149).

“I always felt like the plain and boring little kid of the family that didn’t have ‘em yet” (Olive, 5-6).

These statements convey a feeling that the participants, when looking to the past, believe that their tattoos made them who they are today. The fact the individual believed they were not yet themselves and that they were plain coincides with Tiggemann and Golder’s study in 2006, which proposed that individuals with tattoos have a higher need for uniqueness. Thus, when reflecting upon their pre-tattooed body, the participants in this study may feel remarkably unremarkable and somewhat ordinary.

In reference to a past picture the individuals were asked to bring along of their pre tattooed self (these are not in the appendix for sensitivity) both Wade and Olive expressed feelings of dislike for their un-tattooed skin.

“So plain and un-modified, like I don’t feel like that’s me in the picture if you get me?” (Olive, 106-107).

“I just look so...bare. I don’t like how my arms look at all it’s just... so plain.” (Wade, 112-113)

These responses highlight the journey the participants have been through to reach where they are today by showing their previous hatred for their unmodified skin and putting forth their belief that tattoos have made them who they are today. These quotations coincide with the previous work of Martin (1997), as he argued that individuals use tattoos as a physical support to help them comprehend their identity and to portray who they think they may be. Therefore, within this study, when individuals recall their past selves, they recall not yet feeling complete or can no longer feel as if they are the same individual.

After questions that asked the participants about their past, pre-tattoo, questions were asked regarding the affects tattoos had on the individuals. In terms of the after effects of the tattoo, the main core topic that was uncovered was:



**“You Feel More Attractive To You”.**

This next theme is all about how the individual felt they had improved after obtaining tattoos. It specifically has roots within the concepts of self-esteem, body image and confidence. These appeared when discussing with the participants their body and their feelings towards it after they had been tattooed. A general, increased happiness with the specific body part seemed a common occurrence amongst the participants as illustrated by the following.

“I finally had a piece of my body that I was like actually happy about.” (Wade, 18-19).

“It made me feel cute [...] and it made me like myself a little bit more” (Alabama, 35-36).

“You feel more attractive to you” (Arwen, 125)

“People collect [art] on their walls, people collect it on their bodies. If it makes you happy then do it” (Piper, 104-105).

“I definitely feel more attractive like in myself” (Olive, 170-171)

“I feel better with more tattoos [...] I like the parts of me which are tattooed” (Piper, 97-98).

These declarations portray how obtaining a tattoo has changed the individual's perception of their attractiveness and, thus, improved their self-esteem; showing how the individuals have grown to accept their bodies. These statements support both the works of Koch et al. (2015) and Pajor et al. (2015) who uncovered individuals with tattoos had substantially elevated levels of self-esteem. This is as it appears that one of the benefits of obtaining tattoos were the participant's significant improvement to their self-esteem. This is especially the case when one refers to the previous theme, which is centred on how the participants had self-esteem issues prior to obtaining a tattoo.

Other than a consensus of the participants feeling better about their body and liking themselves more, it was also discussed that the participants also feel increased levels of confidence within themselves. This is highlighted by the following quotations.

“You get a lot of confidence and it's that confidence that people want” (Merlin, 88-89).

“It has given me confidence and a sense of belonging that I hadn't felt before I got tattooed. They make me feel sexy and attractive” (Alabama, 195-196).

“The instant high confidence dwindles down slowly but there is always an air of confidence around the tattoo and body part” (Alabama, 111-112).

“I think it just changes overall how I see myself instead of just the individual parts of the body [...] I definitely get more confident” (Arwen, 107-108).

With regards to her neck tattoo, Piper stated that it

“Makes me more confident, because... well I previously hated it now I love it so it totally changes how you look at it.” (Piper, 46-47).

This emphasizes the immediate general boost in confidence individuals often report. However, several participants reported that immediate spike in confidence to decline over time, yet despite this, they still reported an overall boost in their confidence. The individuals also reported an increase in their self-perceived sexual attractiveness that

ure 3: Alabama's  
too. has been previously noted as a motivation to get tattooed (Antoszewski et al., 2010). These results also show that, regardless of Zestcott et al. (2015) uncovering the negative implicit attitudes individuals have against those with neck tattoos, the tattoo itself can change the negative perception the wearer has surrounding that body part.

This theme is very compatible with the current literature. In particular, this study resonates with Swami's (2011) study in which found that when obtaining one's first tattoo, individuals reported a significant enhancement in self-esteem. However, Swami's (2011) study uncovered that the effect increased over time and not just an immediate boost in self-esteem. This differs slightly from the present study as individuals reported that their confidence surrounding the tattooed area declined over time, yet never fully returns to the original level.

### **"Tattoos Are Like My Own Personal Camouflage".**

The participants, when discussing how the tattoos effected their perception of their body, brought about this next and final theme. It was uncovered that the participants referred to their tattoos as a method of covering their imperfections. Therefore, they expressed feeling much more comfortable with their body and as a result, more comfortable with others looking at their body. The following statements illustrate this.

"Tattoos to me have really worked to somewhat cover [...] my imperfections" (Wade, 114-115).

"It covered the imperfections I saw on my leg and made me only see the perfect tattoo. I still see it as perfect, it is that much a part of me that I forget I even have it as I just see it as me now" (Alabama, 80-82).

"I've been dead funny about the tops of my arms recently but because their tattooed [...] I've not been thinking about it as much because I like the tattoos that are on there, I just look at them instead of my actual arm" (Arwen, 59-66).



"You just end up liking the tattoo more than the bit of the body" (Arwen, 73-74).

"Tattoos are like my own personal camouflage I suppose, they make me feel like everyone's looking at the tattoos and not what's underneath, camouflaging my flaws." (Olive, 86-88).

These responses highlight the feelings that the participants have of wishing to both mask their self-believed imperfections and their wish to distract others from looking at those imperfections beneath. The individuals express how covering their self-perceived flaws changed and improved their perceptions of themselves whilst becoming one with the tattoo.

This concurs with Atik and Yildirim's (2014) belief that some individuals obtain tattoos as a method to cover their scars. However, the present study differs as the

participants used tattoos to cover their insecurities opposed to scars, yet the concept of improvement to their body is still there. Some of the individuals beliefs surrounding this topic closely relate to the research of Mun et al. (2012) which uncovered their participants closely linked their tattoos to an aspect of their 'self' and resulted in the participant's view of themselves to change. This is as the participants in the present study refer to their tattoos as an actual part of themselves; becoming a part of who they are.

### **Summary and Implications for Future Research.**

This study contributes to the present literature on tattoos by providing insight into the beneficial effects that tattooing can have on an individual. This study has done this by using narrative analysis and therefore showing the effects tattooing has by illustrating the participant's journeys. The themes uncovered provide strong corroboration for the belief that individuals benefit from obtaining a tattoo in terms of their self-esteem, body image and confidence. Although increased confidence was not initially predicted, the findings of this study reflect that this may also be a positive effect of tattooing.

Unfortunately, due to restricted time and access to participants, this study only contained six participants; all of which were known to the researcher prior to the study. This means the participants may not be representative and are possibly biased. Although this study provides rich information surrounding the participant's stories and the journey participants undergo due to tattoos, it would be interesting if future researchers were to conduct a more participant diverse study using other individuals from the tattoo community as to uncover more or different effects that tattoos can have on an individual.

### **Reflexive Analysis.**

Research is a joint product of both the researcher and the researched and therefore reflexivity is key (Smith, 2015). Being an individual with tattoos provided me with the incentive to conduct a body modification piece of research. I, personally, have struggled with body image and self-esteem issues for the duration of my life until I became a member of the tattooed community. Altering my appearance, through tattoos, improved my perception of myself drastically and, thus, my interest in this topic grew; especially with the negative perceptions of those with tattoos. I wished to challenge those perceptions by gathering the stories of individuals who have also been affected by the tattooing process.

When deciding to conduct this research I had to consider an array of methodological paths in order to decide which would uncover the most representative of the individuals' journey and rich information. This lead me to qualitative, narrative analysis (Patton, 2002). Narrative analysis allowed me to both map out the stories of each participant and, therefore, understand who they were before joining the tattoo community, as well as derive the impact tattoos have had on their life by how they describe themselves now (Langdrige, 2004; Stephens and Breheny, 2013). This was selected as the method of analysis, as tattoos took me on a journey from bodily hatred to bodily love and, therefore, I have a personal insight as to what the participants have been through to get where they are now.

My own personal story allowed me, as a researcher, to relate to the participants experiences as many of them I have been through myself. This also allows for unique insight in terms of the analysis that another, unmodified researcher would not possess. This insight has lead me to leave the images of the participants prior to their body modifications out of this report as to be sensitive to their feelings as the participants expressed extreme dislike for themselves in said pictures.

Overall, I found this piece of research both extremely challenging due having such a large and complex methodological pathway. However, it was extremely rewarding, as I believe I have helped the participants convey their stories as accurately as possible.

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