



# Stigma of ink: Tattoo attitudes among college students



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 October 2013

Received in revised form 17 February 2014

Accepted 17 February 2014

Available online 12 March 2014

### Keywords:

Tattoos

Stigma

Stigma victimization

Tattoo removal

Attitude theory

Contact theory

## ABSTRACT

We test a structural equations model of stigma against tattooed persons and attitudes toward future tattoos among 195 tattooed and 257 non-tattooed college students. Having tattooed friends and family members undermines stigma against tattooed persons while beliefs about negative side effects of tattooing reinforces stigma assignment. The variables above and the respondent having a tattoo predict attitude toward future tattoos. We test a second model, stigma victimization, drawing on data from the 195 tattooed respondents. While greater tattoo abundance results in greater stigma victimization, respondents with more tattoos also report a greater commitment to their current tattoos and less desire for removal. We discuss results using attitude theory, stigma theory, and the contact theory of prejudice.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The rise in tattoo acquisition rates

During the last several decades, numerous studies have found tattooed people occupying more diverse social groups (Armstrong, 1991; Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004; Kosut, 2006). Recent research shows that over 20% have one or more tattoos (Adams, 2009; Armstrong,

2005; Braverman, 2012), and studies conducted with college students yield similar rates (Forbes, 2001; Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007; King & Vidourek, 2013; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007; Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). This previously marginalized practice has been mainstreamed (Kosut, 2006), and it leads researchers to conclude that tattoos, lower class status, and deviant behavior are more strongly associated among older persons (DeMello, 1995; Ewey, 1998; Martin, 1997). In sum, this shift in postures about tattoos from deviant to acceptable expression (Roberts, 2012, p. 154) indicates that tattoos are no longer used to articulate an adverse attitude (Frederick & Bradley, 2000; Martin, 1997). In fact, Madfis and Arford (2013) argue that the legitimizing process requires the tattooed person to have an authentic narrative that explains the spirituality and deep semantic meaning of the tattoo as an illustration of class values of responsibility, deferred gratification and restraint.

Supporting this argument is research that finds that both tattooed and non-tattooed college students agree that tattooing has become more mainstream (Manuel &

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Sheehan, 2007). Additionally, non-tattooed adolescents would like to have body art (Armstrong & Murphy, 1998; Benjamins et al., 2006; Dukes & Stein, 2011), and many college students, tattooed and non-tattooed, would consider getting a tattoo in the future (Swami & Furnham, 2007).

## 2. Literature review

Despite these findings, research shows that tattoos are still “in limbo – neither fully damned nor fully lauded” (Roberts, 2012, p. 163), and tattooing has not been significantly embraced by older persons, especially those with higher educational levels and incomes (Adams, 2009). Similarly, research continues to find that tattoos violate “core mainstream appearance norms,” especially when the bearer is unable or unwilling to conceal their tattoo and/or has multiple and large tattoos (Irwin, 2003, p. 34). Along these same lines, most college respondents perceive that their parents will object to a visible tattoo, and women are more likely than men to feel this way (Horne et al., 2007). For older persons, the historical stigma attached to tattoos, which is that they are only obtained by lower class individuals and delinquents, remains relatively intact (Adams, 2009).

In this study, we examine stigma assignment and experiences with stigma to assess the extent to which stigma persists among college students. We test two structural equation stigma models. One model examines stigma assignment, deprecation against tattooed persons, and attitudes toward future tattoos among 195 tattooed and 257 non-tattooed college students. The second model examines stigma victimization among the 195 tattooed respondents. This fills a gap in the existing literature by providing a recent, thorough look at perceptions of, and stigma against, tattooed persons; experiences with stigma victimization; and tattoo acquisition among tattooed and non-tattooed college students.

### 2.1. Tattoos and stigma

Even as more people and ever more diverse groups get tattoos, research indicates that tattooing is seen as a negative behavior and stigmatized (Armstrong, 1991; DeMello, 1995; Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004; Roberts, 2012). Stigma suggests that there are certain qualities or characteristics of individuals that are considered undesirable or deviant (Goffman, 1963). Previous research on stigma indicates that stigma results in anxiety, discrimination, and social alienation (Martin & Dula, 2010). Persons who have tattoos remain stigmatized as deviant people, and commonly are stereotyped as having poor decision-making skills, rarely attending church, easily swayed by peer-pressure, having had unhappy childhoods, getting tattooed while intoxicated, and as poor students and rebellious (Armstrong, 1994; Braverman, 2012; Roberts & Ryan, 2002). Moreover, many people view tattooing as thoughtless and irresponsible behavior (Hawkes et al., 2004).

In an effort to control variables other than the tattoo, recent research uses avatars, virtual, computer-generated human characters. Avatars with tattoos are more likely to be perceived as adventure seekers, to have more

sexual partners, and to be more uninhibited than non-tattooed avatars, and these biases are particularly evident for male avatars with body art (Wohlrab, Fink, Kappeler, & Brewer, 2009). In another study, college students rate tattooed women with visible tattoos more negatively on appearances and personality than women without tattoos (Resenhoeft et al., 2008). Finally, undergraduates rate tattoo wearers lower on credibility, competence, character, and sociability (Seiter & Hatch, 2005).

College students with tattoos are sensitive to stigma assignment because many choose to get tattooed on body parts that are easy to cover (Martin & Dula, 2010). This finding suggests that college students fear potential stigma, or they are already victims of stigma (Martin & Dula, 2010). Studies also show that while women are just as likely to have a tattoo as men, women tend to have fewer tattoos and hide them more often (Horne et al., 2007).

Despite the historical stigma assigned to tattooed men, they have enjoyed greater social acceptance than tattooed women (Braunberger, 2000; Scutt & Gotch, 1974). Since tattoos have been considered to be a man’s activity, women who get tattooed are viewed as being greater gender role violators, so they are more likely to endure stigma (Braverman, 2012; Hawkes et al., 2004; Irwin, 2003). This may explain why women are more likely to cover their tattoos than men, and perhaps helps explain why women report the same or less prejudice toward tattoos than men (Aosved & Long, 2006; Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2009; Bierly, 1985). It may also suggest that women tolerate body art more, and, therefore, are less stigmatizing against tattooed persons.

Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen (2010, p. 153) suggest that even within a normative American college student culture, a body art threshold “takes individuals outside the mainstream, creating and maintaining an identity reinforced by social deviance.” College students who have a tattoo (King & Vidourek, 2013), and especially those who have four or more tattoos are more likely to report participation in deviant behavior (Koch et al., 2010). Perhaps stigma assignment among college students also varies depending on tattoo number, location, and content. Among the heavily tattooed, having “sleeves” for example, or bold tattoos on the neck, face, or hands, may receive more stigma than those with fewer, hidden tattoos because they exit the acceptable boundary (Irwin, 2003).

In addition, support for body modification by family and friends can contribute to interest in getting a tattoo (Armstrong et al., 2004; Koch, Roberts, Harms Cannon, Armstrong, & Owen, 2005). Research demonstrates that college students with tattoos are more likely to have siblings, significant others, or close friends with tattoos than non-tattooed students (Adams, 2009; Forbes, 2001). These findings indicate that having close relationships with others who are tattooed, or those who support tattooing, is positively associated with the respondent being tattooed, and they experience less stigma. As such, contact theory, which argues that intergroup contact can reduce intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), seems to be supported by previous research on tattooed individuals.

Contact theory is supported by numerous studies (Cook, 1984; Harrington & Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1993; Patchen,

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