

Corporate Ink: The Relationship between Tattoos in the Workplace and Self-Expression

by

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Introduction

Picture yourself as a recent college graduate in 2019. You start applying for jobs, interviewing at corporate offices, in your best blazer and work attire. Upon entry, your interviewer shakes your hand, and you notice they have a full sleeve of tattoos, uncovered by a shirt revealing their arms. Your tattoos, however, are covered by layers of fabric, your septum ring in your nose flipped up, and groomed to appeal more “professional.” During the interview, you learn that the company's CEO is a 32-year-old who encourages a self-expression ANY office space with a more casual dress code. It’s unlike anything you had learned in school or overheard from other friends and family as they applied for jobs.

Self-expression through body modifications, for the purpose of this paper, specifically tattoos, has seen a modern-day cultural shift, from deviancy to normalcy. Your local grocery clerk, your doctor, your bank teller, possibly even your parent or sibling can have a tattoo, sometimes with deep meaning connected to them, and sometimes with no direct meaning at all. This paper will examine how tattoos have been used as a form of self-expression for college aged millennials, and the impact of tattoos placed in the workforce. Millennials are defined, for the purpose of this paper, as individuals between the ages of 18-28. Tattooing in the 21st century is different from past experiences of getting inked, with your finger access to social media to find artists, explore style, and get inspiration, the modern-day experience is more accessible than in the past. It is becoming more noticeable to walk down the street and see people with body modifications, including but not limited to colored hair, facial piercings, and visible tattoos, as well as have employers or co-workers with body modifications. This paper will explore how

college age students are gearing up for the workforce, and how they view tattoos in a professional setting.

Tattoos in History

Body modifications predate human records, but can be traced back to “piercing among Egyptian royalty; Greek and Roman slaves; men and women in ancient Persia and Babylon; Spanish women; the French and English; the Aztecs, the Mayans, and the Incas; those in India, Tibet, and Nepal; African and Middle Eastern puberty rituals; and American Nez Perce Indians” (Swanger 155). Tattoos have historically been a deviant artform that has transformed into a social phenomenon over the last few decades. Once deemed deviant and unsafe, tattoos are now seen as empowering, self-expressive, and a form of artwork. According to *AuthorityTattoo*, the first record of tattoos dates back to as early as 3370 BC and 3100 BC, found on Europe’s oldest naturally mummified body, with 61 skin markings. In China and Asia, mummified bodies dating back to between 2100-500 BC were found to have skin markings. Historical literature describes people with tattoos as “folk heroes and bandits... It is also thought to have been fairly common for convicted criminals to be branded with a tattoo on their face. This tattoo was used to warn other members of society that this person could not be trusted.” (“History and Origin of Tattoos”).

There are various ways of grouping the social and cultural meaning of tattoos across the decades: 1920’s women’s fashion makeup tattoos, 1930’s social security number tattoos, 1940’s sailor Jerry and the style of American Traditional tattoos, 1950’s bad boy and masculinity, 1960’s patriotism and the rise of hepatitis, leading to the 1970’s when tattoos started becoming

more mainstream and a decrease in cultural relation to deviance. The 1970's and 1980's music scene helped boost the rise of tattooing, greatly connected to rock and roll. ("History and Origin of Tattoos"). As the tattoo industry began to rise, so did the sanitary standards of shops, as well as more modern equipment and inks to help tattooing become a more sanitary profession.

Methods

After reviewing academic journals and feeling a need to dig deeper into several questions around tattooing and the workplace, the following study was created. The study carried out via a Google Forms survey, 94 people responded on their ideas and beliefs surrounding tattoos and what the potential impact in the workplace is. Those 94 people were able to complete the surveys, consisting of multiple choice, and write in responses from their computer or phone. The survey consisted of both students and non-students of Purchase College, age ranges from 17-52 to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The questions were to help better understand individual responses to tattoos as a form of self-expression and their relationship to job seeking and life in the business world. The survey asked some demographic questions, as well as questions on if the survey taker had tattoos, and if they did not currently have any, would they be open to. The survey was distributed via Facebook, as well as personal Twitter platforms and peer-to-peer sharing. Survey takers were asked at the end whether they would participate in a one-on-one unstructured interview, consisting of 7-10 questions and basic demographic information. Using participants from the online survey, as well as personal outreach, a series of four qualitative interviews was conducted to elaborate young adults' answers on how tattoos are perceived in self, and opinions on the impact of tattoos when job hunting, and in their current place of employment workforce. Each interview was conducted via video chat and recorded with

a voice memo app to ensure all quotes were recorded to help support this paper. Participants ranged from 20-25, with a wide variety of education levels, current jobs, and perspective jobs. Participants also ranged in number of tattoos, from 0-6, visible and nonvisible. Each participant consented to having their interview be used to support this paper.

In addition to survey and qualitative interviewing, this paper employs the autoethnographic method to reflect on my own experiences of self-expression through tattoos and body modifications. The autoethnography section connects my participation as a tattooed young professional, and someone whose tattoos have influenced her self-esteem through visible expression. I use autoethnography to give the reader a welcoming into my mind and my personal experiences of getting a tattoo, as well as a glimpse of how tattoos have impacted my life. It will help answer the question of “how do tattoos as self-expression play a role in everyday life.” By using autoethnography, I am able to connect the reader to me on a more personal level, while still supporting research and theory used in the paper.

The Millennial, The Social Norms, and the Tattoo Phenomenon

Using the body as a canvas and the ink as a medium has become a popular form of expression in the 21st century. Pop culture has transformed tattooing into a mainstream, cultural experience from its once deviant, alternative behavior. Humans often follow what other people are doing, and a rise in pop culture models having visible tattoos has had a societal impact on people getting tattoos. Modeled behaviors without negative consequences are often reinforced, and when celebrities and pop culture icons are modeling body modifications such as tattoos and piercings, it helps bridge the gap between alternative lifestyles and mainstream pop culture.

Pop culture has influenced the popularization of tattoos, along with safer, more sterile access to tattooing supplies, which has made it easier than ever to get a tattoo. Pop culture has contemporized tattooing, bringing forth the idea that a tattoo, as a design on the body, “indicates changes in the nature of the social life-cycle” (Yamada 325). This has been a longstanding function of tattoos. In traditional society, the meaning of tattoos was social and collective, projecting certain images such as criminality (i.e. danger) and tribal traditions, whereas in contemporary society social linkages are no longer as important. Rather, the purpose of being tattooed becomes more personalized and individualized. Given this perspective, tattoos and other types of body art can be defined as “the social construction of traditional patterns of sociability in the modern world” (Yamada 325).

Increasing efforts to gain social acceptance, the tattooing industry strived to destigmatize what used to be a dirty, deviant art, into a regulated, clean craft. As sociologist Josh Adams notes:

Both the cosmetic surgery industry and the tattoo industry have experienced increases in popularity and acceptance due to two important factors. First, changing social norms that emphasize beauty and individuality lend legitimacy to these body industries. Second, at various stages in their development both the cosmetic surgery and tattoo industries took steps to assert greater control and increase standardization among their practitioners to take advantage of changing cultural norms and market themselves accordingly (152).

Access to a cleaner, more sterile environment has helped the ever-changing social norms, to a more positive viewing of tattoos. This since has influenced more people to venture to get tattoos in a safer, more sterile and more frequent way.

Tattoos as Empowerment

Tattoos can be viewed as the ultimate exercise of agency over one's own body. For individuals who have experienced trauma or marginalization, tattoos can be understood as a form of body modification that is both expressive and empowering. Currently, motivations to tattoo include "aesthetics; sensual pleasure or play; a symbol of commitment to a relationship, possession, or a rite of passage; or a sign of reclamation (survival of abuse, for example)" (Swanger 156). This is reflected in the experience of Angel, a woman with many body modifications including tattoos, piercings, and plastic surgery, as she reflects on her childhood abuse and how she learned to channel pain "somewhere else." In a 2017 study by tattoo artist Laura Buss & Jungian analyst Karen Hodges, Angel notes that she " had very little control over my family circumstances, and this [getting tattooed] made me feel like I had control over a portion of my life." (Buss, Hodges 20-21) Tattoos give Angel the power to inflict pain, in a controlled, and artistic way, that is unlike her past experiences with abuse. Angel is able to reclaim agency of her body and heal her past trauma tattoos. Similarly, Nathan, a transgender man has used his tattoos to gain a sense of self and reclamation in his body. Nathan states "My perception of myself has definitely felt more 'complete' after each tattoo ... my desire for each piece has been rooted in an homage to something ... as a transsexual, the evolution of my body has been pretty consistent since my transition started. To me, it's all part of the process of becoming who I am." (Buss, Hodges 23) This helps with overall body image and mental state in relation to body dysmorphia and unique construction of self. Tattoos have been used as an "alternative therapy" to coping with body issues, including eating disorders. Tattoos have positive therapeutic benefits, such as growing self-confidence, body appreciation, lower anxiety and higher self-esteem. Nathan's tattoos on his body make himself a home in through art, while

simultaneously giving him a sense of self-expression to help further his transition. The idea of an individual owning one's body in a controlled way in the form of tattooing that appreciates art and can have meaning through one's thoughts and experiences. It empowers the self to see the transition that art can bring to the body, as well as the mind.

When talking about the body and tattoos, the moral conundrum some people face over placement can help empower themselves more. The increasing trend of people having more visible tattoos is becoming less taboo in a modern world, with college students, as well as older millennials leading the movement. Visible tattoos become a talking point, something noticeable besides features you are born with or are typically seen first. They also become a visible reminder to the person who owns the tattoo of the meaning behind it, and are often asked "what does it mean?" College students, defined as 18-24 years of age for the purpose of this paper, are amongst the highest growing rates of people participating in tattooing. This is significant, as because "as graduates, they will have greater socioeconomic standing and more influential occupations" (Dickson 107). A study done at a western United States public college reported "tattooed college students may also serve as a "bridge" between younger tattooed persons for whom tattoos are still correlated with a plethora of negative behaviors and tattooed adults for whom tattoos can represent a positive vehicle for personal expression. Finally, for many young adults, college is the first opportunity to express oneself with a tattoo, since many of them are on their own for the first time." (Dickson 107) Tattoos are most popular among college-aged students because "the tattoo asserts their independence from authority figures such as parents, who have generally enforced strict codes of appearance upon them, making the first visit to a tattoo parlor a normative rite of passage in the United States" (Strubel, Jones 1231). For many college students, going away to school is the first time where there is no constant parental or

authoritative supervision, and for some it is a rite of passage. With this newfound freedom, millennials often feel the need to be the most unique and different they can be, leading to many undergoing a physical and mental transformation. Tattooing is seen as a “rite of passage” for many college students, typically at the legal age to get a tattoo from a shop without written consent from a guardian.

Historically, tattoo practices among individuals is often understood as an act of rebellion in pursuit of self-expression and empowerment. This was highlighted in a set of interviews done at the University of Alabama, as they reported on their tattoos, and personal significance. Danielle Ra’ed, a senior at the college, reflects on her parents' opinions and feelings on her tattoos. "Unfortunately, though, my parents will never understand tattoos. They don't like it. They're very opposed to arm tattoos, but, I'm sorry Mom and Dad" (“Millennials Explain Tattoos Are for Self Expression”). Ra'ed also sports a tattoos of an oceanic wave, Sanskrit Om symbol, and a Jewish star within an Islamic crescent moon and a third eye, as well as an Ankh, the Egyptian symbol for life, which “serves as a tribute to a number of Ra'ed's friends who have recently passed away” (“Millennials Explain Tattoos Are for Self-Expression”). Ra'ed tattoos symbolize her family, friends and other cultural references, and she acknowledges that her parents do not understand or support her choices due to a generational gap. Many millennials seeking parental approval are less thought about when considering a tattoo, due to tattoos not symbolizing deviance but rather self-expression, as well as the generational and potential cultural gaps between Millennials and Baby Boomers. It becomes a rite of passage in some ways, marking milestones in people’s lives where the choices they make become up to them, and no longer the parents or guardians.

Tattoos as Self-Expression

Tattoos as a form of “personal narrative” may be driven to establish control over the body, as well as self-reflection. People with tattoos consistently view their art as a form of unique self-expression, and often gain confidence and self-control that they did not possess prior to having tattoos. Adler “Everybody does something to their bodies to communicate who they are. Even if just to comb their hair” (Adler). Self-expression can manifest in many forms, from putting on makeup, dying hair, and more permanently, tattoos and other body modifications. Men reported “lower anxiety three weeks after obtaining a tattoo” (Strübel, Jones 1232). In addition to helping cope with mental illness and body image issues, tattoos have helped prevent self-harm, as well as give closure to people who have self-harmed in the past by allowing them to cover their scars with art in the form of tattoos. Though tattooing has had ties in history to deviant behavior, a recent study of 18 US schools and one Australian school, the report showed “Almost 60% of the tattooed students reported grade point averages of 3.0 or higher and attendance at religious services from one to three times per month. Most of the respondents (90%) reported continual satisfaction with their tattoos, and 82% would do it again” (Armstrong 22). There is significant destigmatizing of body modifications in relation to deviancy and alternative, especially in college age people. College is a time where students are finding new freedoms and identity. In another study conducted at a small, private liberal arts college in north-east United States, twenty-nine percent of the tattooed students rated themselves more “adventurous, creative, artistic, individualistic, and riskier than the non-tattooed student subjects”(Armstrong 22). Additionally, in this study, these tattooed students also reported a “greater use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs, and more risky sexual behavior than the non-tattooed respondents” (Armstrong 22). Though some behaviors may be deemed deviant by some,

college is a time for exploration of self, when many students experiment with their body, drugs, and their sexuality.

Some students experience disappointment when reflecting on their tattoos. Some note that the tattoos faded, that they were too childish, or they do not like them any longer. These reasons for not liking their tattoos could be from improper care, underage tattooing, and impulsive tattooing. A common trend amongst students getting tattoos and having regrets or tattoos they do not like are linked to stick and poke tattoos. Stick and poke tattoos have similar qualities to hand poking, a non-mechanical, one needle, attached to a dowel, and sometimes thread. Adam Sage is a tattoo artist who considers himself a non-electric tattoo artist and has crafted his career around fine art and hand poking. Sage reflects on the DIY street trend of stick and pokes and his nonelectric tattooing, as recounted in a recent article:

This process involves inserting ink under the skin using needles and various other handheld tools. There's no fixed way of doing it -- Sage is discreet about his tools, although appears to use something resembling a bamboo stick with a needle fixed at the end. It's a slightly slower process than electric so the pain is possibly more about endurance?" (Ferrier)

Sage reflects on some of his clients' disappointments from DIY stick and poke tattoos, "Of course this form of tattooing has some collateral. There's been a rise in DIY tattoos, with people buying rudimentary kits off the internet and doing it at home. "Or pissed," says Sage. "I sometimes get asked to 'fix' hand-done tattoos. But, like a lot of things, some things just can't be rectified. But I'll always try my best." (Ferrier) Being able to cover up past regrets, with new and

improved art gives it a new meaning, but also can show that some things are better left to professionals, who has practiced the craft in order to limit disappointment.

Past Faux Pas is the New Normal

In a 2013 study at a southwest private university, undergrad students were questioned relating to attitudes and perceptions of tattoos and their impact on employment in a white-collar profession. 47.6% of respondents noted they had one tattoo, with an additional 23.8% had tattoos, while 79% of participants noted they had no tattoos. One of the questions asked “If you do not currently have a tattoo and are planning to get a tattoo, will you consider the placement of the tattoo (i.e. the location on the body) with regard future employment?”(Foltz 596) When answering the question, 89.2% indicated they would consider the location with consideration to employment or future employment when getting a tattoo. Students in the survey claim “females in particular, 71.1%, claimed they sometimes found observable tattoos on the opposite sex attractive whereas fewer men, 58.8% found visible tattoos attractive when on a female” (Foltz, 592).

Tattoos in the workplace have historically been a less accepted form of body modification, and, and surveys of human resources employees and job recruiters report that job applicants with visible tattoos are less likely to be hired. According to a survey conducted by Vault.com, “Fifty eight percent of managers would be less likely to offer a job to an applicant with tattoos or piercings” (Swanger 73). In an online survey distributed by Nancy Swanger, Associate Professor at Washington State University, 30 responses, 86.67% “conveyed a negative feeling toward the appearance of tattoos and piercing on interviewees, 3 (10.00%) responses

were neutral, and 1 (3.33%) response was positive regarding tattoos/piercing.” (Swanger 73) In addition, Swanger found that “Approximately 87% of the human resource managers in the hospitality industry surveyed say that visible body modification is viewed negatively.” (Swanger 73) Despite responses directly from HR professionals, the number of people getting tattooed is consistently growing, leading to needing to shift conversation and possible bias or discrimination that HR professionals might hold when hiring people. Expression of self begins to be limited when a majority of people are being looked at through a certain outdated lens, such as that tattoos are deviant, and limit an employee’s ability to perform well in workplaces. Though the sample size of the survey was small and limited to only servers in the hospitality industry, it speaks to other kinds of workplaces as well. Observers (HR department & hiring employees) make inferences about every person who walks into the workplace, and a potential employee only has one first impression. Tattoos and piercings are still hindering an applicant's ability to land a job due to the idea that visible body modifications are less acceptable in the workplace.

Workplace policies and dress code vary from trade to trade, but Travis Stevick, a 34-year-old pediatric Nurse from Ohio is navigating the medical field with a sleeve of tattoos. Stevick reflects on his experiences, compared to other medical jobs, and how “there's different nursing homes and other health care facilities that have policies: no visible tattoos, because of contact with patients. But not here,” Stevick said. "It mixes with our clientele. A lot of our patients have tattoos, so they're not frowned on here. That's why I'm here. I feel accepted. I like the way they feel with it" (Malongowski). His tattoos benefit some of his patients, younger children expressing their likeness for his tattoos, and even some vocalizing their desire for tattoos one day. Tattoos are not a protected class under discrimination laws, but rather it is left to

HR and hiring managers to decide what best fits the image of their company, many times being biased on their own opinions and beliefs, of following company protocol. Kirk Salazar, a retail manager has understood and experienced both sides of opinions about his tattoos. At his current place of employment, Salazar “is able to show off his body art in his current job, a specialty store, where rock shirts and gothic clothing are sold” (Rodriguez). Salazar reflects on having to hide his tattoos in the past, in order to move through the interview process.

Tattooing as a business and career has also become more mainstream, with over 15,000 tattoo shops in America in 2007 (Rodriguez), tattooing has become a lucrative source of income, and validated profession over the years. Television shows like Ink Masters and LA Ink, featuring successful tattoo artists in competition against each other, “have triggered even more interest in the practice” (Rodriguez). Reality competition television has legitimized the career even more, by putting it on display for mass consumption, evidently helping to normalize tattooing as a successful career, rather than one of past connotations of deviance or lack of skill.

Autoethnography: Ink, Not Just for Paper

My personal experience with tattoos is consistent with much of the scholarship on the conventions around tattoos among millennials. I was raised in a household without tattoos, of trade workers that just wanted the best for me. I was told the rings in my nose would prevent me from getting jobs, and that tattoos would leave me unemployed if I made it through college. When you have tattoos, you become hyper conscious of every nuance and opinion when a person sees your tattoos.

The soft sway of the Q train headed towards Coney Island helped my nerves. My sister, who I picked up on her way home from work is quietly listening to music sitting next to me. Surprisingly enough, we were able to snag seats after we transferred trains. The local train makes its normal stops, announcing the infamous “stand clear of the closing doors please” every few minutes. My head is in my phone, scrolling on Instagram, catching up with who’s doing what today.

The doors open at our desired stop, Avenue U, we descend out of the train and down the metal steps, and through the turnstile. We hastily walk a singular street over where I swipe into a TD bank conveniently across from the tattoo shop. The machine thanks me for my withdrawal, as I roll my eyes at the dwindling money in my savings account. I embark out of the bank, where I meet my sister again, who not so willingly came along for the trip. My parents could not yell at me if she was there, right? The crossing light blinked red and spoke out a monotone “Wait” over and over until the walking man was displayed and we crossed over to the tattoo shop. Citizen Ink, located in the heart of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn is perched above a bodega, very Brooklyn.

We climb what seems to be never ending stairs and are greeted with another door, covered in glass paint in an American traditional style with the words “CITIZEN INK, WELCOME.” The inside is smaller than it looks on Instagram, one open room with a small couch, a half wall used as a reception desk, with walls covered in flash sheet art. There's a small door with a vintage bathroom sign on it, and a back office behind the half wall. I introduce myself by saying I have an appointment with Brittany, and I’m told she isn’t there yet and to take

a seat. The waiting gets me in my head and nervous. I have tattoos, four others, two other visible tattoos, near where my new one would be. Something in my mind makes me think this is a make-it-or-break-it tattoo, maybe even a job killer. It's irrational, really, but I turned to my sister whose head peaks up from her phone when the bell on the door rings. A tall, heavily tattooed woman hastily walks behind the half wall before introducing herself to us and sitting down with an iPad. She lets me know before showing me that we can change any part of the design if it isn't what I pictured. My eyes visibly went wide as I saw it, a black and white image of a butterfly, complete with elongated wings and a hidden spider web design weaved in.

“It's beautiful, but can we take the spiral out of the antenna?” I questioned, as that was the one part of other butterfly tattoos that didn't wow me.

Brittany questioned about the size and color I wanted, which we decided on about four inches, black and white only. She left me on the couch to print some sizes, just to make sure it would be perfect. I stood in front of a mirror hidden behind the bathroom wall, playing with placement on the back of my arm with the paper prints, deciding on the smallest. The nervousness is replaced by a wave of calm, as she goes to print the stencil and I get situated on the tattoo bed.

The process of getting the physical ink on you is easy. Just get comfortable, stay still, and tell the artist when you need breaks. While lying face down on the tattoo bed, my mind was wondering about Brittany, and her story. How did she grow up? Was she rebellious? How did she get into tattooing? Do her tattoos have a story? Why is she getting her chest piece covered

up? She asks me to check if I like the placement and I have to venture to the mirror to give it a look. I laid back down and scooted my body, so my arm hung over the side of the bed, onto a pad to elevate it to the proper level. Brittany started hooking up her machines, a soft hum filling the studio as she turned it on with her foot.

“You ready?” She asks me, machine in hand. Clearly no going back now.

“Go for it.”

No matter how many times you get tattooed, the first drag of the needle across your skin is something you don't get used to. The only thing that was going through my head was “it's on me forever now.” I tried to relax as much as I could without moving to avoid any unwanted ink mistakes, but I can hear my sister start talking to another artist in the studio. The conversation reveals that Carina, a graduate of Purchase College, lives blocks from my parents' house in Marine Park. Brittany chimes in to say she also lives in Marine Park, but my attention was on Carina. A successful artist from my soon to be Alma Mater, from my neighborhood, was somehow inspiring. She graduated college in Fine Arts and followed a dream of a “deviant” career, to a path of success.

Forty-five minutes later, the outline was complete. Brittany took a much-needed break, and I checked my ink in the mirror. My sister immediately started snapping photos of my half-finished tattoo, sending it off to my family.

“Oh man they are going to hate this,” she says, as the message is sent.

I accepted not everyone is going to like my tattoos. I've thought about the "consequences" of being a tattooed individual, not yet established in my career. I have a strong sense of agency over myself, and my decisions, including my tattoos. I've prepared myself for a slew of comments that I know I'll receive the following day at my internship where the CEO is a middle aged conservative Jewish man, who speaks actively about how his religion isn't the biggest supporter of tattoos. I've prepared myself for my mom's face of disappointment when she sees it, and my father's face of regret that he can't show his best friend, a man covered in tattoos from head to toe who passed away several years before I even considered getting tattooed. I prepared myself for all the questions, opinions, and thoughts I didn't ask for, nor care about. I've prepared myself for intense research on corporations to find out what their workplace may be like, to help decide what type of coverings I'll need if I get an interview. I've prepared myself for my aunt's boyfriend to make remarks about how I was much more beautiful without the piercings and tattoos as we sit down for Thanksgiving dinner, and how we'll have the same conversation at Christmas time.

Nothing can prepare you for the compliments. No amount of self-love for the tattoo will help your mind gear up for random strangers in the elevator telling you that you have "sick ink" or how beautiful it is. You can't prepare for your friends responding to photos of your new ink in all caps that they love your tattoo, how beautiful it is, or how they want one just like it. You'll get advice on how to heal it from people who have tattoos and notice it peeling, or maybe even a stranger lifting up an article of clothing to show you their newest ink. It's a community of people who are alike in different ways, supporting people like them. People who support your tattoos support you in your choices and know that these tattoos don't define you in a negative way, and

don't change who you are. What is on the outside isn't skin deep, it doesn't impact your intelligence, but can rather help establish agency of yourself, and your body. I'm able to express myself, and thoughts through some of my tattoos, as well as used my tattoos as coping mechanisms and closure to areas of my life that I needed to let go, or be reminded of what's made me the person I am. I am able to take pieces of my personality, and physically wear it on my sleeve for the world to see. Tattoos for me don't define me but add to me and my entire person as a whole.

Fieldwork

My primary research goals were to gain a deeper understanding of how college-age millennials view tattoos and their impact on their future careers, and how their tattoos have helped express themselves as unique individuals. Using both survey and qualitative interviewing as a method, I surveyed 94 individuals to gain insight on tattoos as a form of self-expression, and their place in the workplace. The Google Forms survey consisted of 14 questions, ranging from multiple choice, to fill-in where applicable. The questions asked about personal opinions on stigmatization around tattoos in the workplace, if survey takers found the need to hide tattoos, as well as questions about age, number of tattoos, and what their tattoos symbolized to each individual person. With nearly 100 responses, the majority of people who have tattoos is 76.6%, and 36.1% of people surveyed with tattoos have more than four tattoos. The age range for people who are tattooed are between 16-32, with 70.8% of this group being between 20-24, with 48.6% of people having over three tattoos. When asked what the main reason behind their tattoos were, participants noted that their main reason could be broken into three main categories: self-expression, fashion, and commemoration/memorial. Of the 72 tattooed individuals that responded, 63 replied that at least one or more of their tattoos has a meaning connected to self-

expression, and 26 responses connected to commemoration and memorial tattoos. Non-tattooed survey takers, which make up 23.4% of the survey takers, 18 responded that they would get a tattoo in the future, or consider one, and 5 survey takers stated that they would not get a tattoo in the future. Survey results for not wanting a tattoo include being scared of needles, parental approval, negative societal impacts, potential hindering of job opportunities, and being afraid of regret.

Questions in the survey pertaining to having tattoos and job seeking, 51.1% of people surveyed do not feel the need to hide their tattoos when attending a job interview, and 91.5% of people reported they still feel as if there is a stigma around tattoos in society as a whole. 31.9% survey takers also reported they feel as if their tattoos and other people's tattoos can hinder them from being successful in their desired career, and 68.1% surveyed that no, they feel as if tattoos do not hinder a person's success in their career. With everyday societal norms changing as the world progresses, these numbers will most likely decrease, as younger generations, with tattoos and other body modifications will be at the front line of human resources and management, and can bring modern day thoughts and opinions on tattoos, and hire without there being a stigmatization around tattooing.

Kelly, a 25-year-old tattoo artist from the Netherlands, has seen a trend in age groups, and a correlation to what each group is getting tattooed. She notes:

Young girls from the age of 16-21 its mostly self-expression, they don't really have a deep meaning, and when they get older, people from 30/35-50 get a lot of infinity signs and family related, and the older people get memorial tattoos. There are always some

people who do something different but categorized by age that's what they go for. Does that make sense?

Kelly's interview confirms that there are people of all ages getting tattoos. There is an entire movement surrounding non millennials getting tattooed as tattoos become more normative in the 21st century. Interestingly, when grouped into ages, Kelly noticed that young girls who come in for tattoos, from age 16-21 typically get tattoos that do not necessarily have an alternative meaning, other than self-expression. Her experience within her profession and shop clientele, she has seen a trend of younger female clients seeking tattoos get small symbols, such as flowers, semicolons and quotes they relate to. Expression through body modifications, specifically tattoos, is a way to help an individual find themselves, even if the expression does not have a meaning.

Kelly sees many tattoos of symbolism, such as anchors and infinity signs, and many of them are seen as family forward tattoos in men and women ages 30-50. As tattoos become less taboo in society, The Today Show reports that people ages 30-50 are giving ink a chance, by getting something symbolic of what is most important to them. This age group has probably thought about getting tattoos for a while, and as society has begun to accept visual differences in people and body modifications, it has become accepted for any age to begin to get inked. The group of 30-50-year old are also typically in the workforce, mid-career, can support the idea that tattoos in the workplace have been in the past seen as taboo, unprofessional, and deviant, and workplaces are becoming more accepting towards tattoos in everyone.

When asked “how would you describe the average age group of people coming to get tattoos,” Kelly detailed to me that some of her clients come in for the first time to get their first tattoo at the age of 70, but in the Netherlands, the legal age to get a tattoo with guardian’s permission is 12 years old. For Kelly, her first-hand experience helps reinforce the idea that this is not a phenomenon of younger kids making quick decisions to get tattoos. She notes that the age of people getting tattoos:

really ranges from 16-75. It's not one specific group. I do see a lot of young people coming in more, also the law in the Netherlands is you are allowed to get tattoos from the age of twelve, which I think is incredibly young- with parents’ permission...I only tattoo people from the age of 16 and older, and from 16-18 I require them to have parents with them. It's morally when I think it's right. I have people come from 60-70 people coming in getting their first tattoo.

This interested me because the age is so young, and the parents are ultimately responsible for the decision, the question comes of “who has the best interest in the child, and their future.” In the United States, some states’ laws support minors getting tattooed between the ages of 16-18, with parent or guardian supervision and/or permission. When tattoo seeking people are able to make their own decisions about how they want to express themselves, it gives a sense of freedom and independence on the choices they make on their own body.

When looking at the survey responses to questions about tattoos in the workplace, there is data to support that tattoos are heading in a direction towards being more normalized. 96.8% of people (91 responses) reported that they believe tattoos are more accepted in today’s society. The

three people who said that they believe tattoos are not more accepted in today's society all have tattoos, and all have more than one. The same three people also reported they feel there is still a negative stigma around tattoos and tattoo culture. The question of "Do you find the need to hide your tattoos within your current employment, or during interviews for potential jobs?" has shocking results being that 72 people surveyed have tattoos. 48 people (51%) reported that no, they do not feel the need to hide tattoos during interviews for potential jobs. It is unclear whether the people with tattoos being interviewed have visible tattoos, or if they are typically hidden, but the need to hide them in general can be assumed that there is a visible aspect to it.

Job Killer tattoos, often described as finger/hand tattoos, neck tattoos, face tattoos, and derogatory terms or slurs are an area of discussion in many interviews. With the stigma around tattoos starting to be abandoned, the stigma around job killer tattoos are still in full effect. Kelly reflects on her experiences as a human, but also as a tattoo artist, when asked specifically about "Do you feel as if the Netherlands and as the world potentially gets more progressive, do you think in a typically 9-5 business world, do you think it will be more accepted to show your tattoos, your hand and neck tattoos?" She reflects, with a long pause:

I do think so, especially when it comes to tattoos that are self-expression, if you go for racist slurs or symbols, or whatever that's a different story, I wouldn't be accepting that in a workforce, but a few tattoos does not impact how you do your job. I've noticed when people coming by, they usually talk to their employers to see if they are okay with it, and more and more they are. I do understand it is different with neck or face tattoos, because that is the first impression. I personally don't judge people on their neck or face tattoos, but it is definitely a grey area. Some people don't even think about it much anymore,

which can be also dangerous- they don't see how it can impact them. For example, I had a little girl who was 15. I think she came in with her father and asked for a finger tattoo. We don't tattoo people under 18 on their face or fingers...I asked 'do you know what you are going to do after you graduate?' And she said 'no,' and then I asked her 'if you are going to be a lawyer or you know a job where tattoos aren't as excepted and people are going to judge you on, and it's going to be ugly, it's a finger tattoo..' Some people overreact on tattoos and some people don't even think about their future.

Kelly protects herself from backlash by trying to educate and inform her younger clients that tomorrow and the future does exist, and by thinking more critically about the future, a young client might be able to help ensure a smooth transition to the workforce without discrimination and assumptions made based on job killer tattoos. Though the stigma around tattoos is slowly changing to a more accepting, tolerated body modification in the professional world, Kelly takes the time to have the best interest in her clients, when a potentially rash decision is brought to her.

As a tattooed professional in her field, it has been easier than most for Kelly to flaunt her tattoos, but she still understands the criticism around tattooing, even within her own family. Kelly, outside of her career, notices a trend in older people she knows, criticizing her tattoos, as well as her profession:

I do see especially in older people they don't understand why or what it is or see it as basically fashion. Not necessarily a biker or a criminal but they don't always see that yet... My parents tell older people what I do, and they always say 'I thought she was really good in school? What happened to that?' They don't see it as a real profession; it's

very split. I do see a lot of people who do have jobs they cannot show their tattoos and sleeves, I have an objective view working in a tattoo shop.

Kelly's ability to see tattooing from an objective lens because of her profession allows her to be secure in her professional life and be somewhat unbothered by other opinions on her tattoos and her career. She is still smart, she was good in school, and even pursued a degree in event management, but passion outweighed her academic path, and tattooing was something she had wanted as a career from the age of 21.

Future careers come up in several of the interviews I conducted, when tattoos are in conversation, specifically within job searches in college aged people. Melanie, a 23-year-old recent graduate of Pace University (NYC) reflects on teaching methods in college, and standards in the business world when interviewing. Melanie states:

The one thing we are taught as business students is going in you are literally their fresh face, nobody knows anything about you. You have your hair pulled back, dressed in a white shirt, dark blazer, depending on the season a dress with stockings, minimal make-up, so something like a tattoo, whether it be out in the open, something like a neck or hand or wrist, not covered by clothing, I would love to see it someday be more acceptable, and I don't want to use the term, but frowned on. A lot of people see it and a lot of people get judged by what is on them and that they have a tattoo in the workplace. If you're doing the job you're doing and exceeding those expectations something as a tattoo shouldn't affect that, and if it does affect that it is something not in your control. You're not harming anybody, and it shouldn't be an issue.

The idea that physical appearance is equivalent to performance in a workspace is an outdated way of thinking. Erving Goffman elaborates this in *The Presentation of Self*, and “the importance of spontaneity emerges as an aspect of the performance, as the actor seeks to create a front that does not appear to be contrived. Spontaneity allows for the realization of the “true” self, an idealized type of interaction that allows the individual to realize a desired face.” (Barnhart) With current day society ever changing, astigmatism around looks in the workplace is shifting, and is becoming more inclusive. Younger CEOs, more relaxed dress codes, and body modifications including tattoos are more frequently seen in many industries. Contrariwise to many ideas that tattoos make you unprofessional and impulsive, tattoos should symbolize being able to sit patiently for long periods of time, similar to meetings that could have been emails.

Academia, often stuck in past practices and teaching styles inflicts these past norms of tattoos being seen as deviant, even in teaching methods. That mindset is often carried into the workplace, or instilled in a person’s mind, causing them to be more conservative in their body modifications, and visibility around them. In an interview with Melvin, a 20-year-old junior business student at Pace University identifies that it is taught in academia that looking professional is more important than actually being able to do the job well. But for millennials, there was a common theme of “if you can do the job well, it shouldn’t necessarily matter what you look like.” Melvin reflects on an interview at Atlantic Records, and the professionalism behind tattoos, when asked about the future business world of tattoos, and if he thinks it will be more normalized. He notes:

I think so, I have gone on interviews where higher ups are tatted up, and they don’t hide it. But also, in my field, I don’t think people give a shit, I feel if you have tattoos, they’re

like (shrug) and if you don't, they're like (shrug). I went on an interview at Atlantic Records, and the woman who interviewed me had a half sleeve, like out in the open. And I didn't even really think about it until you mentioned me, because it didn't bother me, nor did it strike me as surprising. And she's a hiring person at Atlantic records, which is one of the best recording studios and record labels in the industry, so yeah, I think it's getting better, see it's getting better.

This change in professionalism standards symbolizes a shift to a more accepting workplace, in terms of professionalism around tattoos.

Taylor, a 21-year-old Biobehavioral Health graduate from Pennsylvania State College, with goals to become a physician's assistant and eventually open her own practice has faced personal and secondhand discrimination in her field because of her tattoos. When asked if Taylor feels as if her career in STEM has been compromised, she states:

I'm trying to pursue a career in the medical field, and when you think of doctors- you don't see many doctors with tattoos. Um, but that's mainly the reason I have not gone down my forearm with my tattoos because, you know, I can wear a shirt to cover it. I feel like there could be some stigma in that, I haven't seen a lot of people with my intended career with tattoos, and visible tattoos so, yes.

Within the medical field, and the early stages of education in STEM, Taylor has already felt the stigma around tattoos in her chosen field of study. It has caused her to be cautious with her tattoos, keeping a half sleeve above the elbow bend, with a dainty, stereotypically modest

wrist tattoo on her wrist. All her other tattoos are non-visible, to help limit the way tattoos can potentially stunt her career in the medical field.

Despite public backlash about tattoos, and tattoos being less normative in STEM and medical careers, it has not limited Taylor's expression of herself through tattooing. She reflects when asked the main influence behind getting tattooed, stating:

I feel like the majority of my tattoos have a symbolic meaning to me, along with being how I express myself. I like how they look on me, I like having tattoos, most of them have meaning, my grandpa wrote this quote on his wall when he was going through chemo and I look down and see that every day can get better and will be okay. I often get told by older family members to "stop ruining yourself, or "you were so much prettier before the tattoos" but at the end of the day I feel more confident in myself, my personal style, and the artwork I have represents me.

By getting strategically placed tattoos, Taylor is still able to get the tattoos she wants, to help develop herself, and have meaning to her tattoos. The tattoos of her grandfather's writing were her first tattoo, on her 18th birthday about a year after he passed away. The tattoo reads "Nothing is ever as bad as it seems", a daily reminder to her to persevere even in the darkest days, and that she'll be okay.

Conclusion

Shifts in society have occurred parallel to shifts in the workplace driven by millennials, where you see younger CEOs and startup businesses becoming more popular, which has shown a shift in how we view professionalism. Employees wearing suits less frequently, and more casual

clothing, have colored hair, tattoos, and an overall more casual office setting, where employees feel more encouraged to express themselves, rather than looking pristine and “professional.” Millennials are redefining what “professional” looks like for the world, because of a greater sense of self-expression and identity. As new studies are performed, and surveys are taken, the amount of people with more tattoos at younger ages will continue to rise, the way they have over the last few decades. While many HR associates and hiring managers are still turned off by visible body modifications, even subtle, slow shifts in thinking like we are seeing in today's age makes a difference in terms of acceptance and normalization of body modifications.

When looking at the practice of getting tattooed, we understand its importance when it comes to self-expression because of personal significance tattoos hold to each tattooed individual. Each tattoo has some sort of story behind it, even if it seems silly and dumb, that was enough of a reason to get tattooed entirely. Tattoos help establish agency for people from all backgrounds, helping to gain a fuller sense of self and identity, while simultaneously expressing themselves. Tattoos are personal, even though the practice typically takes more than one person to complete, and that personal connection becomes a part of that person. By erasing the idea that tattoos are deviant and replacing it with the facts that tattoos can be a form of self-expression and empowering, they can become more normalized in today's digital age. The shift around acceptance of tattoos has helped normalize tattoos, as well digital access to millions of people who are successful with tattoos. This has begun to help broaden the minds of people who were not necessarily exposed to successful tattooed individuals or had a predisposed opinion on body modifications. Accessibility is just one of the factors helping the shift from deviance, to society normal in the 21'st century, and as the internet and art becomes more accessible, the

trend will increasingly rise. The drive to be different and unique will become more noticeable on the skin, through expression of self by body modification and personal experiences further helping to express oneself.

The complexity of this issue is beyond a yes or no answer. Social settings, generational gaps, and different definitions of “professional”. It’s a human desire to change, alter, and modify the body which makes this issue more than binary. With roles and expectations of society and employees constantly changing, there can be hope that a more progressive view on tattoos will become more mainstream in the upcoming years.

When I first began my Senior Project in January of 2019, I had one tattoo. In the last year and a half, I got tattooed five times, and through research and experience now have more knowledge on why tattoos have been appearing more commonly in the workplace, and a deeper understanding of my tattoos have become more mainstream through my own lived experiences. Trying to navigate post graduate life as a tattooed individual but maintaining a sense of self is a game of balance. Tattoos are core to self-expression but have nuanced views dependent on social and professional settings.

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