

THE PERMANENCE OF TATTOOS: MARKED BODIES, IDENTITIES, AND
SYMBOLISM IN EMERGING ADULTS

by

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DEDICATION

To all the people who followed this dream from start to finish, the misunderstood, and the boomers. I hope this helps.

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ABSTRACT

For students, college is a transitional stage where new freedoms, privileges, and experiences may be gained. My research aimed to understand how these students' experiences may be shaped by having tattoos and the decision-making processes that lead to getting a tattoo. My research goals for this project were to identify how tattoos may help college students construct their identities, add symbolic value to their lives, navigate relationships, and the ways that students process decisions around tattoo placement and design. Consequently, I asked the following research questions: How do tattoos influence identity in emerging adults? What is the symbolic value of tattoos for emerging adults? What decision-making processes inform individuals to get a tattoo, choose a specific design, and choose a specific location? What attitudes and stigma do individuals with tattoos experience?

Through the use of participant observation, I was able to observe the choices that students make regarding their tattoo decisions. I found that displaying tattoos was an important way of exchanging social capital and gaining respect among peers, and that for some students this exchange positively benefited them and their mental state. In addition, while tattoos enhanced status among a person's male and female peers, students were likely to conceal their tattoos from family members for fear of disapproval and social isolation. In particular, women were more likely to invest time thinking about how their tattoos may be perceived by others, including friends, peers, and strangers. Overall, my findings show that for these students, the benefits of increased social capital among peers

outweighed the fear of judgement and stigma among family members and individuals from older generations

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout recent American history, tattooing has been an increasingly popular body modification trend for a number of reasons. Tattoos have represented a variety of symbolic meanings, including expressions of self, group affiliation (e.g., sailors, biker gangs, prisoners), and alternative lifestyles. Captain James Cook is regarded as the first known link connecting sailors and tattoos during his first voyage to the South Pacific in the 1700s (Fisher 2002). While on this voyage, the captain and his crew decided to get tattoos as a reminder of their time with the Maori (Dye 1989). This marked the beginning of a long-known tradition for many sailors as well as other military members.

Historically, tattoos have also played a symbolic role in the lives of criminals and prisoners. Starting in the 1880s, French and Italian criminologists began to take note of the tattoos worn by criminals and found correlations between their tattoos and their crimes (Fisher 2002). Over time, tattoos became a symbol of deviant behavior associated with criminals. However, beginning in the late 1880s and continuing with the tattoo renaissance in the late 1950s, perceptions of tattoos have evolved to represent many meanings from a gang or military-related symbol to one of fine art and empowerment (DeMello 1995, 38; Forbes 2001, 775; Fisher 2002). Following the fine art trend, a growing number of people have contributed to this artform throughout the 21st century, which has led to a rise in acceptance of tattoos. According to a recent survey, one in every four American adults has a tattoo (Statistica 2017).

In the past decade, tattooing has emerged as a topic of academic study and has been explored through the disciplines of sociology, psychology, health sciences and nursing, and criminal justice. These studies have looked at many aspects of tattoos, including the relationship between tattoos and deviance (Jennings et al. 2014; Koch et

al. 2010; Koch et al. 2015; King and Vidourek 2013), attitudes and stigma towards tattooed individuals (Dickson et al. 2014; Broussard and Harton 2017), tattoos and personal health practices (Huxley and Grogan 2005), tattoo practices among college students (Forbes 2001; Dickson et al. 2014; Gillen and Dunaev 2017; Greif et al. 1999; King and Vidourek 2013; Koch et al. 2010; Koch et al. 2015), personality and tattoos (Forbes 2001), motivations for getting tattooed (Forbes 2001; Wohlrab et al. 2007; Greif et al. 1999; Martin et al. 1997; Tiggermann and Hopkins 2011), tattoos and emotion (Madfis and Arford 2013; Demello 2000), and gendered aspects of tattoo practices (Koch et al. 2015).

The majority of these studies primarily utilize quantitative methods with large sample sizes. While they have provided important information about broad trends in tattoos related to attitudes and practices, these studies say little about the lived experiences of people with tattoos, especially in relation to the practices of college students and emerging adults. My research attempts to rectify this gap in the studies of tattooing by incorporating personal narrative and observations through my perspective as a member of this community.

“Emerging Adulthood” is a term coined by developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett to describe the changing nature of roles for adults in the United States ages 18-24 (Arnett 2012, 231). Arnett (2012) asserts that emerging adulthood is a liminal stage of life where young people are no longer adolescents but not quite young adults. According to Arnett, emerging adulthood represents a “time of exploration” when many young people are not quite ready to embrace the milestones that have traditionally marked young adulthood, such as getting married, becoming parents, or entering stable jobs (Arnett 2012, 232). Instead, emerging adults are spending more time than ever pursuing

post-secondary education and exploring their identities (Arnett 2012). This intense identity exploration, coupled with new freedoms associated with being legal adults and living away from parents for the first time, makes emerging adulthood a key age group for understanding tattoo practices. Features of emerging adulthood also include instability, a focus on self-development, not feeling completely like an adult, and the idea of endless possibilities (Arnett 2012).

Due to an absence of studies based on qualitative methods including in-depth interviews as well as direct and participant observations in the current literature, ethnographic research exploring personal narratives about motivations and experiences regarding tattoos is needed to provide a more nuanced picture of the practice. This is fundamental in order to understand tattoo motivation during a period of cultural transition in the United States when ideas surrounding tattoos are shifting from being considered deviant to more societally acceptable. During this time, tattoos are becoming more conventional, with a wider band of societal acceptance. However, there is still a segment of the older population who stigmatize tattoos as risky behavior based in poor judgment (Broussard and Harton 2018).

Although my participants widely believed their tattoo motivations were rooted in individualistic or autonomous choices, I illustrate how their decisions were influenced by wider cultural contexts. In order to understand tattoo motivation during a period of cultural transition, I have analyzed my data using practice theory. This analytic lens illuminates how patterns of human behavior follow cultural trends of the time. For example, each decade can be represented through certain stereotypical tattoo designs and placements for that time. During one interview a participant mentioned that his stepmom had three tattoos which she got in the 90s. He laughed as I correctly guessed all three as

being a butterfly, heart, and her astrological sign. This conversation was particularly funny because of our shared understanding that tattoo trends are shaped by cultural context and social milieu.

My aim is to help fill some of the gaps in current literature involving tattoos and contribute to relevant literatures in the discipline of anthropology and other social sciences. My research questions are: How do tattoos influence identity in emerging adults? What is the symbolic value of tattoos for emerging adults? What decision-making processes inform individuals to get a tattoo, choose a specific design, and choose a specific location? What attitudes and stigma do individuals with tattoos experience?

Positionality as a Researcher

As a 22-year-old college student with visible tattoos, I was able to gain rapport among my participants and a few tattoo artists. This allowed me to discover insights not previously explored in earlier research involving tattoos and college students. Because other researchers who do not identify with their research population cannot take into account firsthand the life circumstances experienced by emerging adults, I believe my positionality as a college student with tattoos aided in recruiting people for interviews, increased my authority on the topic, and improved my chances to observe and spend time in tattoo shops. After building rapport with tattoo artists at Cosmic Ink Tattoo, they even allowed me to spend time in their personal workspaces. During this time, I would write up my field notes and talk with the artists in-between tattoo sessions and observations.

From the time I spent at the shop, I quickly gained new privileges. I could walk in the shop and go straight upstairs to their workspaces. Some days I would go to the shop just to have a place to write or hang out. While I genuinely enjoyed spending time in the studio, it also provided a better opportunity to observe and learn about tattoo culture than

the time I spent at Premier Tattoo for my 1-3 hour formal observations. I think this had to do with the more laid-back attitude of the shop as well as my familiarity with the artists and owner at Cosmic Ink. Within a couple months, I was being offered free tattoos at Cosmic Ink. While I started my research with only two smaller tattoos, I ended up getting six additional larger tattoos and starting a leg and arm sleeve, all within the course of six months.

Although I had always had dreams of having more tattoos, like many of my participants, I never had the economic capital to achieve these goals. As my research developed, I noticed how important Instagram was for participants in finding artists. I started following more and more tattoo artists on social media, where I realized some artists were offering free tattoos as a way to practice during their formal or informal training as apprentices. I was able to get two free tattoos by an apprentice, and three free tattoos from my new friendships with tattoo artists.

Through my interviews and observations, I began to take tattooing less seriously for myself. While I previously agreed with the notion of a tattoo narrative, I found myself getting tattoos without personal meaning and “just for fun” to increase my social capital among peers. I found that my participants were more willing to open up to me if I displayed my tattoos, and they seemed to have more respect for my research with each additional tattoo I got. I also found that I had more in common with my participants, which allowed for the development of friendships after our interview. I felt more respected around tattoo shops and more comfortable talking to artists and shop owners.

Although I believe my positionality enhanced my understanding of tattoo practices and culture in the San Marcos tattoo community, there are limitations to my positionality. For example, becoming an insider in the community you study can create

bias, allow a researcher to miss key findings which they have mistaken for norms, and generate skepticism about the validity of their research. On the contrary, an outsider can face difficulties as well such as viewing everything as unusual, missing key findings due to misunderstanding, and being unwelcomed by their target population.

Overall, through the use of my personal experiences and perceptions as well as using practice theory as my primary theoretical lens, I believe I was able to capture new insights on tattoo practices in emerging adults. Additionally, I used ethnographic youth studies done by anthropologists as a way to understand and explain the behaviors of emerging adults. Bucholtz (2002) discusses the problematic nature of attempting to understand youth and adolescent practices exclusively in relation to adult concerns. Instead, by researching this group with their concerns in mind, my research provides avenues for my participants to gain agency where it is usually limited.

Literature Review

Deter-Wolf defined the practice of tattooing as “inscribing the skin with permanent designs and patterns” (2015, 19). Throughout the world, tattooing has proven to be an important element of culture. Tattooing has been used to signal social status, the transition to adulthood, relationship status, and group affiliation (Deter-Wolf 2015). Today, tattoos still serve many of the same functions. Tattoos continue to be linked to social status, adulthood, and group affiliation, while they also serve new functions (Broussard and Harton 2018). For example, tattooing is now considered an artform even though it still carries the lingering stigma as a symbol of risky behavior.

In an age where trends in fashion and cosmetic enhancements are more accessible than in past generations (Cano and Sams 2010), consumers have placed a larger emphasis on achieving personal uniqueness (Ruvio 2008). One way this goal has been achieved is

through the practice of tattooing. Australian studies have utilized the Uniqueness Scale designed by Snyder and Fromkin (1977) in order to evaluate tattoos as related to visible uniqueness. In these studies, researchers have found that since tattoos are a way to increase visible uniqueness, people who have at least one tattoo have a greater desire to be perceived as unique than people without tattoos (Gillen and Dunaev 2017; Tiggemann and Golder 2006; Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011).

Emotions

Tattooing is an intimate artform which has been shown to evoke strong feelings of emotion. These emotions can range from joy, elation, and pride, to disdain, shame, or regret. For example, in *Tattoo* magazine, Iden Rogers proudly confronts another reader for her negative comments towards biker tattoos by saying, “I am a long-time Harley rider, so sweet thing, you just pulled on my chain. My Harley, the Harley scene, and “biker-type” tattoos are all very meaningful to me—very much a part of my life...” (Rogers 1992, 14-16; Demello 2000, 45). In this quote, Rogers seems to exhibit emotions of both anger and pride in response to the negative comments.

On the other hand, many Americans have expressed feeling regret associated with one or more of their tattoos. One main cause of tattoo regret is the idea of an underdeveloped tattoo narrative (Madfis and Arford 2013). A tattoo narrative is the story one tells in association with a particular tattoo (Madfis and Arford 2013). This may be used to justify tattoos at a time when they may now represent middle-class values, rather than predominately being considered a choice made by members of a lower socioeconomic status (Madfis and Arford 2013). For example, although tattooing has become widely accepted among younger people, older generations continue to associate and stigmatize tattoos as being associated with the lower class and deviant groups

(Adams 2009). In my research, I highlight the ways that previous research has created problematic implications in understanding tattoo regret among young people, and the strategies that emerging adults use to take back agency through their tattoo decisions. Further, I discuss how personal narrative is helpful in understanding tattoo regret from the perspective of emerging adults.

Motives

DeMello (1995) discusses the ways in which tattoos have become an artform with new motivations, rather than simply the markings of a sailor or biker gang association. These motivations may include empowerment, self-expression, desire to be unique, as decoration or artistic expression, spirituality, cultural tradition or rite of passage, addiction to tattoos, remembrance of accomplishments, milestones, other people, etc. (Forbes 2001; Wohlrab et al. 2007; Greif et al. 1999; Martin et al. 1997; Tiggermann and Hopkins 2011). Out of these motivating factors, self-expression, individuality, and personal aesthetic appeared most frequently in these studies.

Stigma and Attitudes

Even with the contemporary popularity of tattoos, studies involving American college students have found that when shown pictures of women with and without tattoos, “women with tattoos may be perceived as less attractive, less caring, and less intelligent or less honest and religious, depending on the type of tattoo,” (Broussard and Harton 2018, 522; Resenhoef et al. 2008). Other studies have found that people with tattoos were viewed more negatively than non-tattooed individuals (Broussard and Harton 2018). Dickson et al. (2014) found similar results with college students and adolescents expressing regret about one or more of their tattoos due to stigma, with men having more regret than women.

Deviance and Risky Behavior

Much of the existing literature that discusses emerging adults and tattoos has centered on a discussion pertaining to deviance and risky behavior, usually focusing on young adults as making regrettable decisions. One problem with this deviance framework is that it stems from adult perspectives about tattoos rather than reflecting the perspective of the person getting the tattoo.

The existing literature defines risky behaviors as engaging in sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and poor health practices. Research on college students has shown that students with “four or more tattoos were roughly two to nearly ten times more likely to report deviant behavior than are those with no tattoos” (Koch et al. 2010, 157). This “deviant behavior” includes the substantive statistical likelihood of people with four or more tattoos engaging in heavy drinking, using illegal drugs, having multiple sexual partners, and having a significant arrest history (Koch et al. 2015, 536).

Similarly, King and Vidourek reported that college students with tattoos are significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviors (defined as engaging in sexual intercourse, using illegal drugs, and drinking alcohol) than those without tattoos (2013). Another study done through The Department of Health Psychology at Staffordshire University found that many tattooed and pierced participants had not considered the possible health risks associated with these practices, such as bacterial and viral infections like syphilis, tuberculosis, and HIV (Huxley and Grogan 2005).

These studies have primarily used online surveys and quantitative analyses which focus on risk-taking behaviors among emerging adults and college students. Contrarily, Ravert and Gomez-Scott (2015) have researched risk from the perspective of college students using a qualitative approach. In their research, they point out the two main issues

in the current literature as being a lack of understanding risk from a youth perspective as well as the failure to understand that not all risk is harmful (Ravert and Gomez-Scott 2015). For example, positive risk taking, such as asking someone out on a date or applying for a job promote personal development. As previously mentioned, the existing literature on tattoos outlines risky behaviors as drinking alcohol, having sex, using illegal drugs, and getting tattoos. However, in moderation these may be seen as calculated and minimal risks to emerging adults, as well as common behaviors among a university-student aged population.

Observations

From these observations and further reading, I have found that there are two main gaps in the literature on tattoos and body modifications. One major gap in the current literature is that the topic of tattoos and body modifications has only been briefly explored through the discipline of anthropology using qualitative research methods.

Although there have been a couple of studies done in anthropology, the majority of research on this topic has emerged from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, health sciences and nursing, and criminal justice utilizing quantitative methods. Many of these studies rely on questionnaires or surveys—some online, with hundreds or thousands of subjects. Through an anthropological lens, utilizing an ethnographic approach and personal narrative, I shed light on the ways that tattoos in college students are embedded in identity and how the desire to earn social capital may influence tattoo motivation in emerging adults. The importance here lies in the assumption that new data will emerge that would not be discovered from surveys and large-scale quantitative data.

The second gap is rooted in the fact that many of the existing studies done on tattoos have oversampled women. In my research, I interviewed 6 females and 9 males in

order to understand potential gender differences in tattoo narratives. Though my sample size of 15 is small, my research provides preliminary ethnographic insights about the relationship between tattoos, identity, and social status that future qualitative research can build on.

The research facilitated by other social science disciplines has generated many large-scale statistics which are helping in understanding national and global trends. However, through the use of this ethnographic data, I was able to highlight inconsistencies in previous studies within the context of college students and tattoo practices. While large scale data is important to highlight trends across populations, these previous studies do not provide in depth descriptions of tattoo motivations or perceptions and experiences of college students. For this reason, I believe practice theory provides a helpful lens in order to explain tattooing as a phenomenon among emerging adults.

Practice Theory

Bourdieu's practice theory seeks to explain the social and cultural world by analyzing practices that connect to form more complex social entities (1972). These entities operate within wider cultural contexts called "fields" which are composed of the social rules that influence and constrain peoples' behavior, and that may influence their decisions subconsciously (Bourdieu 1972). Bourdieu also discusses the concept of cultural "capital", which relates to the skills mannerisms, and tastes that a person acquires as a member of a particular class, and consequently is an important factor in the formation of group and self-identity (Bourdieu 1977). For example, I could see cultural capital at work in a person's tattoo decisions as my research participants considered whether or not they should get face, hand, or neck tattoos, as well as what tattoos may be appropriate or acceptable in different locations on their bodies.

Importantly, cultural capital may also lead to inequality, as certain forms of capital are valued over others within communities. Cultural capital also can be viewed in relation to tattoo practices through the degree that one is looked down on or valued in their groups and social circles. This affects one's relation to group identity and how someone may view themselves as a result. I found the concept of cultural capital especially useful for understanding tattoo practices in emerging adults. In my research, students tended to base their tattoo decisions on social factors, including whether their friends and peers had tattoos and the extent to which they felt supported by these groups in their tattoo choices.

Finally, my research highlights how students use their limited agency and economic capital to find a way to get the tattoos they desire. Bourdieu (1977), discusses the term agency, or the ways people attempt to create a sense of control with their various levels of capital, within the fields imposed on them by society. For individuals, this agency refers to the beliefs they have in their power of individual action (Bourdieu 1977). College students are a population with limited agency. During this time, many traditional students have limited time, money or economic capital, skills, and mobility. For some students, this meant finding ways to build relationships with tattoo artists in order to get discounted or free tattoos. Overall, I observed students attempting to earn social capital with their peers and gain a feeling of agency by choosing tattoos they believed represented resistance to parental and generational norms in society.

For Claire, having tattoos made her feel included in a group with limited membership: the tattoo community. She said:

I think that's a part of it and like I said earlier about being a part of the tattoo community in some sense and conversation starters. If you don't have tattoos it's not like you can't be involved in that and can't talk about stuff like that, but it's

kind of like everyone wants to be included and it's cool to be on the in with something new and exciting. Especially with tattoos because they're kind of edgy or rebellious or whatever you want to describe them as.

My research explored how tattoos are negotiated within a person's social sphere in order to bring value to their life. Across different communities, various skills and knowledge are appreciated, with each aspect of culture having a unique value. For example, face and neck tattoos can infer status and respect in some communities but stigma in others (Zestcott et al. 2018). The nature of cultural capital is that it may be spent or invested in a particular way. In this context, tattoos are a status investment within a person's peer group. For this project, I am interested in understanding the extent to which tattoos provide value and capital in Texas State Students ages 18-23. Through this analytic lens, I hope to inform the following research questions: What decision-making processes inform individuals to choose a specific design, and a specific location? What is the symbolic value of tattoos in emerging adults?

In Halnon and Cohen's, "Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos: Gentrification in a new frontier," they discuss the ways in which muscles, motorcycles, and tattoos (MMT) can be used as examples of cultural capital, and how these symbolic practices can be used as a lens to explore gentrification (Halnon and Cohen 2006). Each group, people with muscles, motorcycles, and tattoos all have their own subcultures, which provide social support for lower-class men. Tattooing has provided these men with a way to express "cultural values and personal sentiments" (Halnon and Cohen 2006, 42). Tattoo shops have also provided marginalized men with a "home away from home" where sailors, drunks, young boys, and blue-collar workers could bond over shared experiences (Demello 2000, 59-60). Through their tattoos, these men are able to identify with others who they may perceive as sharing similar life experiences, norms, and values.

Identity Formation Among Youth

According to Hebdige (1988), youth culture tends to focus on social and cultural aspects of identity expression such as dress in order to exhibit the limited power available to this group. It is within this framework that I seek to understand how tattoos may influence identity in emerging adults and the attitudes and stigma tattooed individuals may experience as a result.

One way in which youth construct identity is through communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). A community of practice is a group of people who create a shared identity through mutual interests or group activity (Eckert and Wenger 2005). In this sense, tattooed individuals may belong to a shared community of practice. For example, in “The Chicana Canvas: Doing Class, Gender, Race, and Sexuality through Tattooing in East Los Angeles,” Santos (2009) discusses how Chicanas in Los Angeles use their unmarked bodies, known as “the Chicana canvas”, as a way to represent their social identity.

In Mendoza-Denton’s *Homegirls* (2008), she describes the ways in which her experiences of studying gang girls at Sor Juana High School have uncovered the relationship between various aspects of identity and cultural style including language, fashion, and material culture (2008). In order to stand apart from white students, gang girls embrace their Mexican heritage partially through their appearance. This involves wearing oversized hoodies, feathered hair, and long, dark eyeliner. By wearing long, thick eyeliner, a girl may indicate that she is more willing to fight. Girls also draw on English and Spanish strategically to denote gang affiliation as well as alignment with national identity. These are some of the ways in which the gang girls shape their identities through language practices and personal style.

This theory may be used to understand the study of emerging adults and tattoos as an example of identity construction that youth and college students may experience. In these studies, youth are shown to draw on various symbols which they then incorporate into their identity practices. Youth as well as emerging adults may combine elements of style in order to define culture and personal identity during a period of rapid growth and change. This can be seen through attitude, dress, and other symbolic markers such as tattoos.

Uniqueness Theory

Uniqueness theory was explored in the 1970s and 80s by clinical psychologists C. R. Snyder and H.L. Fromkin (1980) in their essay, “Uniqueness: The Human Pursuit of Difference”. Uniqueness theory seeks to explain the emotional and behavioral reactions felt by people in relation to their similarities with other people. This theory explains the phenomenon that happens when people associate the similarities they share with others with unpleasant feelings, which in turn causes them to attempt to differentiate themselves from other people (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). This may be done through many avenues including through body modifications, fashion, choice of diet, and career choice. He hypothesized that students who believed that they were more unique would be more satisfied with themselves (Fromkin 1972). To put a test to his hypothesis, he gave false responses to student’s lifestyle surveys, rating some as more similar to others and some as less similar. When given the results, he asked students to rate their moods and found that the students who were told they were less similar to others, reported more positive moods than the other students.

According to uniqueness theory, when people believe they are similar to others, they are motivated to separate themselves from this reality by establishing uniqueness.

However, there is a certain level of need for group affiliation and social approval. This means that although people feel the need to be unique, they will express themselves in ways that will not result in total social isolation or disapproval (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Snyder and Fromkin believe that there are individual differences that vary according to the strength of the need for uniqueness (1977; 1980). In order to further understand this, they developed a scale that measures individual differences in the need for uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). From these results, they found that people who scored highest on the scale were more likely to join social groups and rated themselves less similar to others (Snyder and Fromkin 1977).

As previously mentioned, many people are motivated to get tattoos which they feel are unique. Although many studies have found uniqueness to be a motivating factor for pursuing a tattoo, two Australian studies found it to be a source of direct motivation. In one of these studies, Tiggemann and Hopkins, found that participants with at least one tattoo had a higher need for uniqueness than those without tattoos (2011; Gillen and Dunaev 2017; Tiggemann and Golder 2006).

In Ayalla Ruvio's study, "Unique Like Everybody Else? The Dual Role of Consumers' Need for Uniqueness," she analyses the shopping habits of consumers in order to understand the ways in which they may express their need for uniqueness and individuality (Ruvio 2008). This can be seen through their "selection and use of products and brands" (Ruvio 2008, 445). Ruvio believes that uniqueness is often used in order to avoid social isolation. This type of uniqueness can be attained through the purchase of limited items and personalized or distinctive brands (Ruvio 2008).

While past generations have emphasized the importance of individuals, Tracey Follows (2015), a writer for Campaign, explains the ways millennials value uniqueness

and refuse to “do average”. She says, “millennials are discovering that the things they value are unique, more expressive, sustainable, and exclusive” (Follows 2015). Similarly, Twenge (2006) describes millennials as anyone born between 1980 and 2000 and categorizes them as the “Me Me Me Generation” with higher levels of self-esteem and self-serving motivations than any previous generation. This includes their parents, the baby boomers, who have been previously called the “Me Generation” (Time 2013; Twenge 2006). In the same way, we can see that millennials are choosing to get tattoos in order to stand out from the crowd, while maintaining a balance between tasteful and extreme. In order to avoid being ostracized, many people avoid getting face and neck tattoos, large tattoos on visible parts of the body, and tattoos that may be perceived as offensive (Zestcott et al. 2018). However, the latter is dependent on context—especially in relation to class and culture.

Significance and Context

Although I am interested in understanding tattoo narrative and individual motivations for pursuing specific tattoo designs and locations on the body, I hope to use this lens in order to find emergent themes throughout my data and provide insight into the cultural phenomenon that is tattooing. With one fourth of adult Americans sharing the experience of getting a tattoo (Statistica 2017), contextual information becomes extremely relevant and important. The same tattoo can have many different meanings depending on the person and their situation. For example, someone may decide to hide a particular tattoo for a job or internship and reveal it later at a bar or with friends, all within the same day. In another sense, two people could have a similar tattoo for entirely different reasons. For my research, it is important to note how context may shape individual decisions and how it may situate a person within a broader context in society.

Methods

In order to fill the gaps in the current research on tattoo practices among emerging adults I used qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and participant observation. For my sample population, I chose tattooed Texas State students ages 18-23 in order to understand the corresponding patterns in perception, attitudes, and behaviors of peoples' tattoo choices. I selected San Marcos, Texas for my research location because it is a college town with eight tattoo parlors within a 0.6-mile radius surrounding the town square. This allowed for direct access to the target population. In addition, with the median age in San Marcos being 23.7, it was relatively easy to locate emerging adults ages 18-23. By focusing on traditional college-aged students, I hoped to capture similar themes in attitude and perception surrounding tattoos throughout my research.

Once I gained permission to observe from the shops, I began by conducting direct observations. I conducted observations at two tattoo shops, Cosmic Ink Tattoo and Premier Tattoo in San Marcos, Tx. At these shops, I observed students entering the shop, discussing tattoo designs, and getting tattoos. This process consisted of recording my observations through jottings, which were later reproduced in my field notes. This allowed me to evaluate the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of the artists and customers. The recruitment process for interviews consisted of asking clients if they would like to participate after observations, snowball sampling from said clients, and posting flyers.

Once I established rapport with the shop owner and artists at Cosmic Ink Tattoo, I was able to spend time in the artists' personal studios where I would catalogue my observations. After my initial observations, I completed 15 interviews over the summer

and fall of 2019 with Texas State students ages 18-23. My initial aim was to interview 10 male students and 10 female students for a total of 20 interviews, however several participants did not show up for scheduled interviews.

In the end, I interviewed 9 male students and 6 female students. All of my interview participants were traditional undergraduate students at Texas State University. As part of my interview procedure, students were asked to self-report their ethnic background. From this data I found that 53% of my participants identified as White, 13% as Hispanic, 13% as South East Asian, 13% as European, and 6.7% as American Indian.

Before conducting interviews, I developed a guide based on my research questions. My research questions include: How do tattoos influence identity in emerging adults? What is the symbolic value of tattoos for emerging adults? What decision-making processes inform individuals to get a tattoo, choose a specific design, and choose a specific location? What attitudes and stigma do individuals with tattoos experience? During the interviews, I took notes, recorded the interviews using a digital recorder, and transcribed them. My interviews primarily took place at local coffee shops due to convenience for both the myself and the participant. After transcribing the interviews, I gathered the transcripts and my field notes from participant observation, direct observation, and interviews, and analyzed the data for emergent themes. By transcribing my interviews, I was able to familiarize myself with the data in order to develop a coding scheme and database where I would later code and organize the data. I found many themes which will be explored in subsequent chapters including those surrounding tattoo motivations, design choices, meaning and value, aspects of the tattoo experience, identity, social media, future plans, relationships and perceptions, gender, tattoo community, and regret.

II. TATTOO MOTIVATION AND CHOICES

It was just kind of really random and I was just being very emotional one day. And I was just like you know what, I'm going to go do something for myself and get out of the house and you know, do something that isn't just sitting around and not being me. You know, I'm not enjoying life so.

–Samuel, 23-year-old

Motivations

The current literature on tattoo motivation suggests that individuals have one motivating factor behind getting all of their tattoos with self-expression, individuality, and personal aesthetic being the most frequently mentioned (Forbes 2001; Wohlrab et al. 2007; Greif et al. 1999; Martin et al. 1997; Tiggermann and Hopkins 2011). In contrast, tattoo motivations were more complex and multidimensional among my participants. All of my participants described a different motivating factor for each of their individual tattoo decisions. Their motivations included some of the following responses:

“it was free”; “to fill in space”; “for the sake of art”; “for my mom”; “why not”; “had extra money”; “for the aesthetic”; “just for looks”; “I wanted it”

Despite the variety of responses, I uncovered several themes in the responses I recorded. Specifically, I will discuss tattoo motivation through the following themes: as a way to honor someone, peer influence, which I refer to as the “tattoo bubble”, financial reasons, just for fun, and as a coping strategy.

To Honor Someone

Many students described getting a tattoo in order to honor someone either living or deceased. Most honored family members through tattoos; however, some mentioned

getting a tattoo to honor a famous artist, musician, or celebrity. Samuel, a 23-year-old anthropology student and bartender was tall and lean with curly red hair that sat just above his shoulders. He described himself as “pasty” and made me feel comfortable talking to him by the way he slouched down in his chair and laughed through his words. His story began with the loss of his sister due to suicide, which informed his decision to get his first tattoo to mark the anniversary of her passing. He remarked,

Oh yeah, and then people ask me about this one—this little skull bandit. This was actually one of my first major tattoos that I ever got... I got it on the anniversary of my sister’s passing, so in Spanish it reads *desconsolado* and the conjugated form means, ‘I am heartbroken’.



Figure 1: *Desconsolado* Tattoo
Photo submitted by participant

Samuel’s story was captivating, emotional, and made me interested to find out more about how students use tattoos as a way to honor another person. June, a 21-year-old student studying business management, decided to honor her mother through her most recent tattoo. She was already at Jo’s Café when I arrived and looked both nervous and excited to participate in the interview. She explained how honoring her mom and her culture was the main motivator behind the second of her two tattoos. Her tattoo reads *lakas*, which means strength in “old Filipino scripture” called Baybayin. When I asked

her about why she decided to get her most recent tattoo she said:

“My mom is the strongest person I know, and I’m just very prideful about being Filipino and about my culture, so that’s why I got it in Baybayin. My mom is such a strong person and it’s just a reminder of my mom, and for me to be strong, and to be like her.”

Even though June decided to get her tattoo in order to honor her mom, she later told me that her mom is “so against” tattoos, and “won’t even look at it” due to her traditional Filipino upbringing. Despite this, June expressed that she was still able to maintain a strong mother-daughter relationship.

The idea of June dedicating a tattoo to her mom—knowing her mom’s distaste for tattoos, raised many questions for me in terms of tattoo motivation and tattoo decisions. This led me to question if other students may share similar experiences. What effect do outward perceptions about tattoo decisions have on students? How might those effects influence future decision-making processes surrounding tattoos for students? In what circumstances may a student disregard these perceptions and go through with their tattoo decision?

“The Tattoo Bubble”

For some students, the desire to acquire tattoos stemmed from the tattoo choices made by the other people in their lives such as friends, family, coworkers, and peers. This concept, which I have termed “the tattoo bubble,” is the idea that being surrounded by or in close proximity with people who have tattoos, are acquiring more tattoos, and who regularly talk about tattoos may normalize the practice, making individuals more open and eager to get their own tattoos.

For Claire, a 21-year-old woman with dreams of owning her own metalsmith studio, who frequently scrunched her nose as she pushed her glasses up, it was this

specific reason that drove her to get more and more tattoos.

I was constantly surrounded by people getting tattoos...which made me want to get them even more. I was surrounded by them and I wasn't necessarily inspired by what the other people were getting—more of that just people are getting tattoos and I want another one... I think that that also played a role. I got five tattoos in less than a year.

Claire explained that she was primarily influenced by her coworkers as well as tattoo artists coming to her workplace. For her, seeing “cool tattoos” all the time and being “surrounded” by people getting tattoos heavily influenced her tattoo motivations.

It was every single month, and someone was getting a tattoo. There were more of us working there before, and so people were always getting tattoos. One month it was me, one month it was someone else. And [tattoo] artists were coming in, which made me want to get them even more.

Specifically, Claire mentioned that it was being surrounded by coworkers and other tattooed people such as tattoo artists that made her want more tattoos. She explained that most of the people in her friend group at the time did not have tattoos; it was not until working in downtown San Marcos among her tattooed peers that the idea of getting tattoos became “more normalized” for her. College students are surrounded by peers who consistently perpetuate trends and navigate new avenues of self-expression. For emerging adults, tattoos are a popular choice for self-expression since they are seen as a way to increase social capital among their peers.

While many students were not as explicit in articulating their experience in “the tattoo bubble,” I was able to see it represented through the ways they described their friend groups and work environments. For example, students would describe feelings of excitement associated with showing tattooed friends, family, or peers their new piece. In this way, Aiden described the relationship he shared with his friend Matt, and how it has

influenced the way he feels and thinks about getting tattoos. Aiden was a 22-year-old accounting major with a minor in math. He was sporting a messy man bun, and although his facial features were soft, his forehead was creased with stress and an apparent lack of sleep. Aiden had ridden his bicycle to the interview and was excited to “finally have a day off” from one of his three jobs. From Aiden’s narrative, I understood the importance he placed on sharing his increasing tattoo collection with his friend.

Jodi: Is there somebody that you’re most excited to tell when you get a new tattoo?

Aiden: I’m really excited to tell one of my friends—his name is Matt. I’m really excited to tell him every time I get a new tattoo.

Jodi: Does he have a lot of tattoos?

Aiden: Yeah, he has a lot.

Jodi: That’s cool. So, it’s kind of like a collection of sharing what you have?

Aiden: Yeah, he got his first one before I got mine and so once I started doing it... I’ve gotten a lot now, so I would tell him about them every time.

Just like with Claire, I interpreted that Aiden was also seeking validation through his friend group about his tattoos and looking to increase his social capital. Other students described a similar practice of involving specific friends and peers in their tattoo process. This could be done as a way of joking or in a serious manner. For example, one friend may say to another, “what would you think if I got a huge snake on my face” in order to test the bonds of the relationship. As one participant said, “a good friend would never let you get a snake on your face”.

Financial Motivators

Many students talked about struggling financially while in college. Some were working two or more jobs in order to afford rent, tuition, and groceries. In Desi Land, Shankar (2008) discusses how social classes have different access to material resources and the various strategies of Desi teens to acquire the things they want. In this

ethnography, Shankar (2008, 90), mentions that middle class Desis often have to “form other relationships with the objects they desire”. For example, in Desi culture, this is seen through the objectification of luxury cars. Shankar (2008, 92) discusses this concept in use through the way Desis arrive at events. Typically, this entire process is filmed, and anyone seen driving up in the vehicle, getting out, and standing around it becomes a star. Because of this, Desis are strategic about their positioning as anyone who makes an appearance in the video, or who has seen the video becomes associated with the prestige.

Similarly, for students who want tattoos, many described having to save up or find other ways to get the art they desired due to their limited economic capital. While a lack of funds was a large factor for most students, others shared a different experience. Due to the relationships they had built with their tattoo artists, they were able to obtain free or discounted tattoos in order to fill their bodies. I was able to experience this firsthand. After gaining rapport with the artists at Cosmic Ink Tattoo, I actually began to build a friendship with Ethan. After spending many long days doing observations in the shop and hanging out in the studio, he asked me why I did not get more tattoos, as we had discussed my many ideas for future designs. I told him my personal story of how I had been paying my way through college and my refusal to take out any student loans. After this conversation, he began offering me free tattoos in exchange for “advertising rights”.

As a young woman in college with visible tattoos, I attracted attention. When people asked about my tattoos, I could refer them with business cards and stickers he gave me. In total, Ethan gave me three free tattoos and I brought in eight new clients. From my observations, these relationships between college students and tattoo artists seemed to be based on friendship first and the business aspects second. Ethan was a fairly

generous artist. While hanging out in the shop I observed him give out free tattoos to two other male students and one female student who he considered to be his friends.

Other students with limited economic capital used a variety of strategies to gain agency in their lives. For example, several of my participants were baristas at different coffee shops around town and were able to build relationships with tattoo artists while serving them coffee. While my participants ensured me that they were not giving away free coffees, they mentioned strategies such as memorizing the artists' orders and bringing them coffee before their appointments in order to strengthen these relationships. Some of these relationships even developed to a point where the students were offered positions at the tattoo shops to clean-up after hours for compensation as well as the access to form deeper relationships with artists and collect even more free or discounted tattoos.

Levi was a free-spirited 21-year-old who identified himself as "impulsive" and was in the process of changing his major for the third or fourth time. He had wavy chestnut-brown hair which was matted and whirled around his tan face in the summer breeze. When asked about his most recent tattoo experience, he blatantly responded with, "a bear on my forearm". He went on to express that he had been wanting the design, but that his ultimate motivation was that it was not going to cost him anything.

Jodi: Okay so it was free, anything else?

Levi: No, I just saw this guy's Instagram page and thought it was really cool. So, I said, "how would you feel about doing a honey bear and have honey dripping out of his mouth in a traditional style?" He was like, "yeah man just come in," and I was like, "how much is it going to cost," and he said, "I won't charge you anything, it's fine." So, I was like, "okay".

The honey bear was the first of two tattoos that Levi had gotten for free. He explained that with both of his free tattoos, he had suggested the idea to an artist and

because they liked him and the design, they decided to do them for free. He said:

I usually draw a design and send it to an artist and say, “I think you could execute this perfectly”. If I feel like they can do a really good job of it and make it in their own style. If they are doing their own thing that they drew themselves, but had an idea in mind... I think that’s awesome. Also, it’s cool to go to an artist with an idea because it makes their job easier for one and two, they’re like okay this is actually a really cool idea, how can I make this even cooler? It gives them a base to go off of and gets their creative wheels turning too.

As an artistic guy, the relationship with the artist was very important to Levi. He enjoyed giving them artistic freedom and wanted to make sure the experience was equally rewarding for the artist. Levi explained that he could see himself becoming a tattoo artist for a while, which I think played a significant role in making sure the experience was mutually enjoyed. Similarly, Aiden shared the same experience with at least three of his fifteen tattoos being free. Aiden was able to get free tattoos due to the fact that one of his jobs was cleaning a tattoo shop in the evenings and occasionally dog-sitting for one of the artists. Although they did pay him weekly, he also collected bonuses in the form of free tattoos.

Samantha was a petite 22-year-old dance major. She was wearing a long, patterned skirt and a white cropped tee that showcased the majority of her tattoos. During the interview, I struggled to follow her story through her singsong voice full of whimsy.

When I asked her why she got a tattoo of a coffee bean on her arm she explained:

I got it on a whim for free. So, my friend was getting a tattoo and my other friend and I were with her, and she was like, “if we wanted matching coffee beans would you do them?” And he was like, “yeah do you want them right now?” And I was like, “wait, I don’t have any cash on me.” And he said, “that’s okay, it’s on the house”. And I was like, “but wait I have to think about where I want it.

Even though Samantha was ecstatic to get a free tattoo, she was conflicted due to a lack of time to plan out the tattoo location, especially in relation to future tattoos.

However, I knew that Samantha had another free tattoo on her sternum, which she was able to spend more time planning out. For this particular tattoo, she had mentioned that she knew she wanted “a botanical thing...but also Ukrainish” since her family was originally from Ukraine. However, I still wanted to know more. In order to understand this experience, I asked her to explain what the process of getting a free tattoo was like for her.

Anyway, so I thought I wanted ribs because I didn't think I wanted botanical things on my arms, so I was like sunflowers, pinecones, pine needles, and little baby wild strawberry things. Because those are things that remind me of when I was a small person. But that's an expensive tattoo. And I get some discounts because I work there and I'm friends with them, but it's still an expensive tattoo. So I decided that was going to be a graduation gift, but then I was offered a free tattoo, and since I know another tattoo is going to be here eventually, I need to figure out where I can get a small tattoo that, placement wise, makes sense, that also isn't so obvious so that I don't have to tell my mom I got another tattoo. And I was like, “oh a sternum sounds great”. And I was like, “oh well what should it be?” And then I was like, “maybe it should make sense with what I'm going to have here,” and then I thought about it and I landed on sunflowers because it matches but also because it is literally the center of your being because it's your sternum.

The process of getting a free tattoo proved to be stressful for Samantha since she preferred to spend time planning her tattoo decisions. Samantha was another student who was able to build additional relationships with tattoo artists from cleaning the shop, which factored into why she was able to get free tattoos. From listening to students' stories about how they obtained free tattoos as well as doing observations at tattoo shops, I noticed that free tattoos were typically offered on the spot and not premeditated by the tattoo artist or the person being tattooed.

Financial Limitations

At the same time that financial reasons aided in students' tattoo motivation, they were also an important inhibitor which kept some from getting the tattoos they craved.

Many students explained that these economic factors played a large role in making their tattoo decisions. While these students had a desire to get more tattoos, due to a lack of funds, they were “saving up” for their next big piece.

This was the case for Kyle as well. He said, “When I get an idea, I try and save up for it. Of course, being a college student is kinda hard and its expensive”. He also commented on saving money in order to get tattoos.

When I first started it was kinda like bam bam bam. Everything at once. There was a two-month period where I got like 4 of them done all at once and from there I would take a break to save up again and then back to back tattoos again.

The idea of rapidly getting several tattoos was familiar to many students. Once I began probing as to why this was the case, I began to understand that for some students the tattoo experience can be quite addicting or thrilling. In addition, many tattoo artists have hourly rates rather than a set rate per design, making it more economical in some cases to get multiple tattoos in one session.

The Shop

From my time spent doing observations and gaining rapport with tattoo artists at Cosmic Ink, I was eventually invited to hang out in the “studio” which is the work area for the artists. Here each artist has their own open cubicle of sorts where they go to draw up tattoo designs, work on personal art, eat, joke, and hang out. An important aspect of the “studio” is that clients are typically not allowed unless they have a personal relationship with the artist.

The positioning of the studio indicated both status and power over the customers. It was positioned at the top of the shop like a private balcony which overlooked the rest of the lobby, where artists could peer over and prejudice customers who walked through

the door. They would call down to them and say, “tattoo or piercing,” and took particular joy in taking people off guard and making them jump. I found out through spending time in the studio that the artists typically took turns helping customers, rather than matching the customer’s needs to the artist’s specialty, such as fine line tattooing or traditional. When a client walked-in without an appointment, the owner of the shop would call out, “you’re up” to the next artist in line. If an artist was hanging out with a friend, or working on personal art, they could also choose to give up their place in line for that round and would say things like, “I’m going to pass,” “nah man, you take it,” and “I’m not taking clients right now”.

It was while hanging out in the studio that I also learned how much free time the artists had. There were many days where the artists did not have scheduled appointments and would wait for walk-ins where they would take turns seeing customers. It was on days when the shop was particularly slow that the artists would give out the most free tattoos, either to returning clients, friends, or each other. Although I initially suspected that male tattoo artists would give out more free tattoos to female friends and clients, I found that it was split fairly evenly. In addition, I observed one artist who had a frequent client that was open to whatever the artist thought would be best. Whenever he would come into the shop, this particular artist would let his client choose one of the designs he had been wanting to tattoo to do for free as appreciation for him valuing his work.

Coping Mechanism

Several students also described getting tattoos as a self-prescribed coping mechanism for managing depression, self-harm, stress, and as a way to replace past scars

with a more positive symbol. Although some students mentioned that getting tattoos was just another way of hurting themselves or feeling pain, they still believed it was a more positive way to channel their negative energy. Through the practice of getting tattoos as a way to cope, these students believed they were using artwork in an uplifting way.

Adler and Adler (2011), discuss the ways in which self-harm without suicidal intent may provide different functions for different groups. For adolescents, they outline self-harm as a coping mechanism for personal traumas, especially in regard to the drastic changes that happen throughout youth. The authors illustrate how self-harm took on new meanings for youth rather than just being a stereotypical practice primarily performed by one group with similar motives. In this way, self-harm “became a legitimated mode of emotional expression and relief among a much wider population. Society learned...that people who were neither suicidal nor mentally ill were using self-inflicted injury to cope with life’s difficulties” (Adler and Adler 2011, 2).

In Samuel’s case, he viewed his tattoos as way to start a conversation with others about personal loss and mental health. On his right bicep he had two “Treehouse of Horror” themed tattoos, which were inspired by the annual Halloween episodes on the TV show, *The Simpsons*. These include the main character Homer Simpson as King Kong, and his wife, Marge Simpson hanging by a rope around her neck. When I asked him about how people react to these particular tattoos he said:

Samuel: My mom... when I showed her that she slapped me. She was like, “why do you have that?”

Jodi: Did she think of it as a slap in the face to her?

Samuel: [laughs] Oh no no no, just knowing my personal history with... I’ve lost family members to suicide, so I can see where it comes in there. But honestly if nobody talks about suicide and things like that it’s a disservice to people who have passed away.

Jodi: I get that. It’s like are we just not going to talk about it?

Samuel: Yeah, it's mental health and it's on the rise. So, I'd rather have a conversation with somebody about something like that than you know, leave it untold.

Jodi: So, do you think that's kind of a kick starter for that conversation?

Samuel: Oh yeah.



*Figure 2: Treehouse of Horror Tattoo
Photo submitted by participant*

Similarly, Raven found tattoos to be a proactive way to prevent self-harm, treat her depression, and cover up scars from cutting herself. Raven was a spunky 23-year-old studying forensic anthropology, who I think my grandmother would have called a spitfire. She radiated beams of charismatic energy, yet through her story I began to see another side of her. Raven spoke with me about her tattoo motivation as a therapeutic way to relieve stress and prevent self-harm.

I've also got a handful that I call my mental breakdown tattoos—where something traumatic will happen and I'm feeling crazy, and I just want to feel something. I don't know, I have a history of self-harm y'know so I sort of... for a long time, I was getting tattooed every couple of months, and that's how I ended up with so many at such a young age. I was going pretty frequently to feel something and to avoid hurting myself or whatever.

Even though Raven viewed obtaining tattoos in a positive light, some people in her life were skeptical of this particular form of “therapy”.

Raven: People are like, “well you are still getting hurt though”. But societally,

that's much more acceptable than the scars that come with self-harm or whatever. It's sort of therapeutic and you sit there for three hours and these poor tattoo artists are like therapists—we sure don't pay them enough.

Jodi: Yeah, I can see that. Can you tell me more about that?

Raven: If you're sitting there for like three, four, or five hours or whatever with somebody touching you... it's a very intimate process and y'know, people just unload all their shit on them [tattoo artists]. It's a very therapeutic experience.

Kyle also expressed that his most recent tattoo was inspired by a current period of depression, and the positive response of his best friend during this time. Kyle was a 21-year-old student with a booming voice and a large personality to match. I realized as he walked towards the wobbly wooden table just how much space he consumed—yet everything about this sizable individual with nineteen tattoos, face, and ear piercings screamed, 'be my friend'.

In the midst of his depression, he had the lyrics, "Do you take me as I am," written in his best friend's handwriting tattooed on his inner bicep. He explained that during the course of his depression, many of his friends were non-responsive and ignored the changes going on in his life. However, it was his best friend who was there for him to check-in and "really keep him going". His tattoo is a reminder of the bond they shared during this time as well as to mark this difficult time of his life.

Jack, a 21-year-old English major, had a poetic nature about him. He had reddish brown hair and was very articulate. In his experience, he had gotten some of his tattoos as an outlet to stress and external factors in his life. He said:

I always find myself wanting to get one when I'm really stressed. It's almost like an outlet. It's like, "oh my god there's so many things going on I need a tattoo". And then I just think, "what reasoning am I using in my head to validate that and also what am I connecting... where am I going with this".

Although Jack's story was a little different from the other students in this section,

he still used tattoos as a positive outlet to stressors in his life. From listening to Raven, Samuel, Kyle, Jack, and other student's stories, I realized how impactful it is to get tattoos as a response to mental health issues and other negative events in people's lives. This raised the questions: what is the meaning of getting a tattoo for mental health reasons? Why is this such a pervasive trend, and what is the takeaway? As I spoke with more students and tattoo artists, I began to understand how widespread the nature of getting tattoos as a response to mental illness is.

Ethan was a fine-line tattoo artist in San Marcos who was very articulate and intelligent. I met with him on several occasions to observe and discuss the behaviors of his clients and walk-ins. He was particularly invested in self-care and talking to him felt easy and therapeutic. He was always well dressed; he usually wore dark jeans, a knit sweater, and suede boots. When I asked him about people getting tattoos as a coping mechanism, he told me that he has people come in all the time who just want to feel something.

Samuel mentioned that mental health awareness is on the rise, and that it is more acceptable and important to talk about it now than ever due to its prevalence. This trend is reflected in the normalization of getting tattoos, especially visible ones, that emerging adults are also more open to discussing issues of mental health. This correlation is extremely important going forward as getting tattoos for mental health reasons has yet to be discussed in the current literature on tattoos in college students.

Timing and Planning of Design Choices

In order to understand and define the timing and planning of tattoo design choices, I asked students the following set of questions: What made you decide to choose

a particular location for your tattoo/s? Did any planning go into it? Was it a spontaneous act? When planning your tattoo, did you make an appointment or just “walk-in”? How far in advance have you made a tattoo appointment? Did you put down a deposit for said tattoo? Can you walk me through your tattoo process? From the time you get an idea to the time you actually get the tattoo, what does that time frame look like? Is there a location you would never get a tattoo, where and why? From these questions, I received a wide variety of responses, ranging from, “I’ve always known I wanted it,” to “I just kind a felt like getting a tattoo. So, I walked in and looked at what the shop had and got it”.

Importantly, I found that the timing was relative when trying to understand tattoo design choices. After several interviews, I realized that the idea of time for what constituted as prior planning was up to the discretion of the student. Each student seemed to having a vastly different concept of what this meant. It took another couple of interviews to realize that this idea needed further probing in order to understand each student’s concept of time, and the ascribed meaning that followed. Many students described at least one of their tattoo experiences as happening “on a whim” or “spontaneously”. However, after unpacking each individual’s timeline, I found that in general, students had pre-planned the design and placement weeks, to months, to years in advance and it was making the actual appointment that happened without much prior planning.

This idea aligns with the fact that my respondents’ lives were carefully planned out and every minute of every day was typically booked. They have assignments, meetings, jobs, hangouts, and other events which require prior planning. For them, getting tattoos on a whim was a way to experience something spontaneous, while also

appearing carefree and cool for their friends. However, they are still being influenced by cultural patterns. These students are attempting to gain agency through their cultural, social, and economic capital through the resistance of societal norms through their tattoos. Although there are elements of individual circumstance which affect people's choices, they are still acting within wider cultural currents which influence their decisions.

Benjamin was a humble 21-year old who spent the majority of his time working on his business plan to open his own coffee shop. He was constantly refining this plan to include better equipment and the best possible product, which he said made him feel more prepared and excited for his upcoming graduation. He was a very thoughtful individual—he seemed both caring as well as pensive, as you could almost see an idea on the tip of his tongue at all times. In describing when he decides to get tattoos, he said, “I kinda get one every year because that’s when I can pay for it”. He explained that he would save for about a year and as soon as he had enough, he would walk into a shop and choose a “flash”² design. He said, “The most recent experience that I had, I just kinda felt like getting a tattoo. I had the money, so I walked in and looked at what the shop had and got it”. When I asked Benjamin about how he planned his first tattoo, he said:

I got my first one freshman year of college. This one on my forearm. My parents weren't very happy with the placement, but I knew I wanted it there. I had had the idea for over a year, so I had thought it out and really wanted it. It's a mountain with a moon, and the sky, and landscape, surrounded by two roses.

Similarly, Kingsley spent a several months planning his tattoo decisions. Kingsley

² A flash tattoo design has meant different things over the years. Early on, flash was the generic artwork displayed on the walls and in books of tattoo shops. Now, an artist's flash work are the current designs they are interested in doing, often for a set price, in their current style or interests. It can typically be found on an artist's Instagram page or website.

was a 23-year-old nursing student with a dark sense of humor and a great sense of style. He was the type of person to overshare information. For example, during the interview he openly discussed his recreational drug use. When I asked him about why he got his most recent tattoo he responded by saying:

I always wanted a mandala. There's a guy named Mason Ball and I really wanted something by him. I was going through a mini heartbreak at the time and it was a tattoo that I've always wanted, by an artist that I've always liked.

Kingsley's timing and experience was also influenced by the artist's schedule.

Due to the artist's wide popularity and distinct style, Kingsley the artist as being "booked out months in advance". He explained that he was lucky to be able to get an appointment due to someone cancelling at the last minute. Although he knew he had wanted the tattoo, the last-minute cancellation left Kingsley with the option of either scheduling the tattoo around the artist's last minute opening or waiting several more months for an opening that better fit his personal schedule. In this example, even though Kingsley felt that he was getting a tattoo last minute and spontaneously, it was really larger cultural factors which influenced the timing of his tattoo appointment.

Influence of Parents

Many students based their tattoo decisions on the opinions and feelings of important people in their lives. The overwhelming response to this category was that participants were most afraid of what their mom would think, or that they decided to conceal their tattoos for their "mom's sake". Throughout each of these narratives, participants either did not mention their dads, or mentioned that their dad cared about their tattoo choices to a lesser degree than their mom.

By examining this information through practice theory, one can see that the

students are getting tattoos with the belief that it is a risky behavior with the knowledge that their parents will most likely disapprove. However, these students are able to gain agency by the act of getting a tattoo, which will elevate their social capital among their peers. Many emerging adults live under the direction and approval of their parents until the age of 18, when they leave for college. While on their own, they are now ready to seek approval from other college students who have the ability to elevate their social status. In combination of these two factors, we can see that Aiden was conflicted on his changing status. While he wanted to avoid getting visible tattoos on his arms to respect his mom's wishes, he continued to get tattoos in other places respected by his peers.

Aiden: I don't have visible arm tattoos because of her. It's like a respect thing that I still have a little bit. I wanna hold onto that but I also want to do it. So, in my defiance I still get them in other places, but I still get them.

Jodi: And that makes her less angry that they aren't on your arms?

Aiden: Yeah, she wishes I wouldn't do it obviously, and she wants me to stop doing it, but I think it's fun to do it. I like having them.

When I asked Aiden about how his dad felt about him getting tattoos, he expressed that he wished he would "stop doing it" but did not really care as long as he avoids getting face tattoos. He said, "he's also understanding that I'm my own person and I can do what I want". Rather than a lengthy response like his mom's, his dad's response seemed to be much more hands-off and relaxed. Similarly, when I asked Levi if there was anyone who he did not want to see his new tattoos he said:

My mom. My dad is accepting of them. But my mom is very much a realist and was raised by my grandpa on that side who's just crazy conservative. He's a firefighter—very strict and super opinionated. He didn't let her do a lot of stuff like that, but my dad just kind of raised himself and feels like whatever works, works.

For Ashley, a 21-year-old geography student who decided to "go big or go home" with her first tattoo, her mom's reaction was what she feared the most. Ashley had long

brownish-red hair, which shined like a copper penny whenever the sunlight touched it. Her eyes were big and green, which I think were probably hazel, and was one of those people that looked like she typically wore glasses.

During our interview, Ashley mentioned that she had concealed the first of her two tattoos from her parents for “a month or two”. This proved to be very difficult for her due to her close relationship with her parents, and the fact her tattoo spread 12 inches over her thigh. In order to better understand her story, I asked Ashley about her experience in telling her mom about her first tattoo.

Basically, when I showed my mom she started crying and she was like, “That’s a giant fucking tattoo. I can’t believe you did this. I’m so disappointed in you.” She was mad at me for forever. Then I had to go to the beach with her that weekend, so I wore pants most of the time because I didn’t want her to really freak out. She told me that she cried herself to sleep for three nights. It was a whole thing. She’s so dramatic. I knew she was going to take it badly, but I didn’t think she would take it that bad. I think maybe because it’s so big... Now, she still doesn’t like it, but she accepts it. I can’t really wear shorts around her still.



*Figure 3: Snake Tattoo on Thigh
Photo submitted by participant*

Ashley also mentioned that the expansive size of her tattoo played a large role in her mother’s disapproval. Since her first tattoo, she has collected a few smaller ones in

more visible areas, to which her mom has responded more positively. While Ashley knew her mom would be upset in regard to her tattoo decisions, it seems she ultimately decided that the respect and admiration from tattooed peers was worth the scrutiny from family. Other students also felt the need to conceal their tattoos from their moms. Although in another context his tattoos were appreciated and displayed proudly, Kingsley hid his first tattoos from his mom for several weeks for fear of a negative reaction. He said:

When I first got this, I wore jeans and a long sleeve for like two weeks because this was on my arm and my mom was like, “what are you doing?”. So, one day I needed to be in the car with her. And so I was like, “hey mom, I have a tattoo,” and I showed her. And she freaked out. And she was like, “why”, and I was like, “I just wanted to”. She didn’t understand, you know she’s a traditional Asian mom. And I’m like it’s an album! And she’s like, “I don’t have a tattoo of Mariah Carrey!”. My mom to this day hates it.

During my conversation with Claire, she uncovered one explanation for why students may be so concerned with their mom’s opinion on their tattoo choices. When I asked her if she had ever felt judgement from others for having tattoos, she said:

Yeah, especially my older family friends and family. I have one specific family friend and she goes off on me for having tattoos and it gets really annoying because I’m like you’re not invested in my body and you’re my family friend but you’re not my mom. What you tell me, I care about, and I respect you but... you’re still not my mom.

Claire’s comment was the first to bring up the specific investment of moms in their children’s endeavors and bodies, as well the investment of students in trying to respect their parents through their tattoo choices.

We feel the need to tell our parents and not necessarily ask but tell them out of respect even though we know that if they are upset that we are going to do it anyway. It’s one of those things where they don’t own my body, but I definitely respect that they created me. It’s a decision that I’m making about my body but where’s the line of where you can cross that. I feel like that changes with each relationship between a parent and child or grandparents and those relationships, so it just kind of depends. My family has been pretty open about it. They don’t really like it, but they are getting used to it.

Aiden, Ashley, and Levi were not alone in their fears of their mom's reactions to their tattoo decisions. Samantha also felt the need to justify her tattoo decisions specifically out of respect for her mom. For some students, this meant going so far as to generate false tattoo narratives to please their moms. Yet, when I asked about how other family members responded to their tattoos, many participants had little to say about their dad or other family member's reactions. If anything, students mentioned that their dad, "didn't really care" or that they wanted them to "stop getting more" but didn't dislike tattoos as much as their moms. In order to further understand this question, I decided to consult Ethan's perspective as a tattoo artist.

When I asked him whether he felt people generally were more concerned about their mom or dad in relation to their tattoos he said:

Oh, definitely the moms. Moms are important. Women are more important than men. Women are creators, mothers, sisters, and daughters. People are worried their mom will be disappointed, while their dad will just be mad. Disappointing your mom is like disappointing god but disappointing your dad is like disappointing your neighbor. [laughs] With your dad they will just be mad, but when they say their mom will be upset it means she will be hurt, and no one wants to hurt their mom.

From working at a tattoo shop in a college town, Ethan said he deals with "the mom issue" every day. While the thought of disappointing a person's mom does not generally stop people from getting tattoos, he said students often choose locations that are easier to conceal, or choose a design they believe their mom would approve of. He said, "this way at least she may come around to the idea at some point".

Self-imposed Guidelines: Placement, Color, and Size

When I prompted students about their design choices, many of their responses included a set of rules or guidelines that they typically followed in accordance to tattoo

design, placement, color, and size. These often included popular cultural rules like no face tattoos, no hand tattoos, no tattoos on butts, no offensive tattoos, no tattoos of names, however, other students listed more specific guidelines for their tattoo work. When I asked Aiden if there was a location he would never get a tattoo, he said:

Aiden: I don't think I'll ever do my face or my butt. Yeah, I'm never going to get a butt tattoo.

Jodi: [laughs] Okay, I'm going to quote you on that.

Aiden: I have some small rules. No butt tattoos, no Texas tattoos, and no cross tattoos. That's been one for the whole ride.

Jodi: Okay and what about neck tattoos? Maybe neck?

Aiden: Depending on how my life turns out I may do my neck. My tattoo artist, Felipe, thinks I'm going to get my neck tattooed [laughs].

The idea of getting more tattoos or tattoos in more visible locations “depending on how my life turns out,” came up frequently while discussing decision-making processes surrounding tattoos. For example, students mentioned that they based some of these decisions on if they thought they would be able to either conceal their tattoos at work through their clothing or if they thought their future employer would not be bothered by their tattoos. While all students felt as if tattoos were becoming less of a problem in finding a job, they also mentioned that it was still career specific in some ways. For example, Kingsley was not concerned about becoming a nurse with tattoos since he would be wearing scrubs at work, with the majority of his tattoos are on his legs. Similarly, Samantha admitted that there was some controversy about visible tattoos within the dance community, but at the end of the day it “doesn't really matter”.

I think I want a rib thing because I dance and this is a lot harder to hide, because in the dance industry, there's a lot of companies who are like no, but that's also a performance thing. If you don't have blonde hair, they don't want you because they want that look. So, it's one of those things where I think, “eh, it doesn't really matter”. Worst case scenario, I'll use makeup to cover it up, but also most

places don't care because it is art. And most art people think, "oh you have a tattoo, who cares". Some of my favorite choreographers are just one big tattoo. I just think that if they can dance on stage, then same.

In this way, Samantha and other students looked to established members of their ideal career in order to base their judgments and ideals about tattoos. The idea here being that if a person with visible tattoos can get the job they want, then they should be able to do the same. These students modeled their behavior on people with visible tattoos who worked in their chosen field.

Students also mentioned the idea of maintaining balance, cohesiveness, and flow in relation to their tattoo decisions. In particular, some participants expressed concerns about getting too many tattoos on one side of their body as they felt it would disturb their natural balance or flow. Kingsley mentioned this specific qualm in relation to making his tattoo choices.

Kingsley: All my tattoos are on the left side of my body. It wasn't intentional at first but after I got my first tattoos on the left side and I got my piercings, I noticed that everything was on the left. I used to have a nose piercing on the left and it was something that just kind of happened.

Jodi: Oh, wow that's interesting. Would you ever consider getting tattoos on the right side?

Kingsley: Maybe eventually if I start to feel unbalanced. As of now, I plan on getting more on the left side. It's an aesthetic choice.

Kingsley mentioned his decision to get his tattoos on his left side had to do with his personal aesthetic and how he wanted to be perceived by others. Although he did not mention a direct correlation with his tattoos, he mentioned his nose and ear piercings were on his left side because it is the "gay side". He told me that he identified as a gay man, which led me to believe that his personal rules to avoid tattoos and piercings on his right side may be closely tied to maintaining balance within his identity. Samantha was also concerned with preserving personal rules and guidelines. She said:

I think a lot about lines, probably because I dance and because I did design, I think a lot about the flow of things. I'm never going to get a horizontal something around my whole arm because it cuts the line. And if you're dancing that's not good. I know a girl who has mountains and it's kind of dark and when she raises her arm it cuts her line off. I think a lot about how it looks in relation to all of the other ones, and how does it look on me when I'm wearing something or moving. Does it cut off lines?

Although they may seem abstract, upholding these rules was extremely important to students. These rules primarily addressed future goals and career choices, as well as aspects of their identity and how they wished to be perceived by others.

Derived Meaning and Value

In order to understand what meaning and value tattoos have in college students, I asked the following questions: Can you tell me about your tattoo/s? What is the story behind each one? What do your tattoos mean to you? Is there a specific meaning behind any of your tattoos? Is there a certain tattoo that is most meaningful or memorable for you? Is there a story that goes along with that tattoo? What symbolic value or meaning if any, does a particular tattoo have for the individual and how does this correspond to a larger picture?

From these questions, I heard three main responses. These were 1) that there was partial meaning associated with one or more of their tattoos, but that they felt the need to justify their tattoos to others with a tattoo narrative, 2) there was not much meaning associated with one or more of their tattoos or that they were "just for fun", and 3) that they did have a particular meaning behind their tattoo design.

Justification for Others

Researchers have found that tattoo narratives may be used to justify tattoo decisions to the self and others (Madfis and Arford 2013). However, Madfis and Arford

(2013, 550) explain that in the absence of a well-developed narrative, people may “experience negative reactions from others when their tattooed images or words are subjectively perceived to lack sufficient meaning or depth of thought”. This was the case for both Benjamin and Samantha who felt that in order to get a particular tattoo they were obligated to have an associated story to justify their decisions for other people. These students seemed to be acting within wider cultural contexts, or “the field”. Benjamin primarily felt pressure from his family to have a specific reason behind his first tattoo. Even though he admitted to ‘fluffing up’ his story, he said that it also does have some true meaning for him. He said:

I think I had to justify getting a tattoo to please parents, but I’ve always been fascinated with the outdoors and traveling, and being on top of a mountain, you see things from a different perspective than the people on the bottom. It’s kind of a way to remind me that it’s not always your point of view, look at it differently.

In the same way, Samantha did have meaning behind getting her first tattoo, but was keen on keeping her true motivations to herself since it was “her own thing”.

However, she still felt the need to justify getting her first tattoo to her mom.

This one has a lot of meaning that I haven’t told anyone. Because it’s my own thing and because I wanted it for a certain reason. But my mom is kind of weirder about tattoos. Before I got this first one, I was so respectful. I didn’t turn 18 and just go get a tattoo. One day I texted her and said, “here’s all the reasons that I want this”. And I gave her some honestly b.s. reasons because I wasn’t going to tell her the real reason, because I didn’t want anyone to know. So, I was like, “here’s all of the things, and they all seem legit”. And it wasn’t untrue, it just wasn’t the main reason.

Rather than revealing the real reason behind her tattoo decision, Samantha chose to give her mom multiple lines of reasoning to convince her that she was getting a tattoo for “legitimate” reasons. Even though she did have a reason to justify her tattoo for herself, it was still more important to her to justify her decision to her mom in order to

receive her approval and validation.

Varied Meaning

As previously mentioned, some students had different motivations or reasons behind each tattoo decision. For some, even if there was not a “lot of meaning” behind a particular tattoo or design, the majority of students still felt justified in their tattoo choices. Some students even remarked that they “no longer feel the need” to justify tattoos with elaborate meanings and that tattoos can now be “just for fun”. On this topic, Ethan mentioned that tattoos are a, “permanent reminder of a temporary feeling”. In this way, students may feel spontaneous, impulsive, chaotic, and independent when getting a tattoo “without a lot of meaning” or “just for fun”.

Hebdige (1988) suggests that youth are primarily discussed only when they are seen as problematic. In other words, he provides examples of the ways in which youth “make their presence felt” by strategically acting out of cultural and societal norms, which in turn allows for their grievances to be “talked about, taken seriously..., and acted upon” (Hebdige 1988, 17-18). In this way, emerging adults who get tattoos for fun, rather than for a meaningful or personal reason, may be pushing the line of what is societally accepted in order to generate discourse.

For this theme, students not only meant that they got tattoos because they thought of it as a fun or thrilling experience, but some also got tattoos which were meant to be witty or laughable. While students mentioned that these tattoos were primarily “just for fun”, I believe that these tattoos were valued by other emerging adults, which increased their social capital.

Aiden had a sizable tattoo of a skeleton wearing a helmet on his right thigh with the words, “ride fast, eat ass”. He said:

The skate fast eat ass thing is so funny to me [laughs], but I said it jokingly and she drew it, so I did it. At this point I get tattoos for fun so like it’s not...there’s not a huge meaning behind most of them anymore.



*Figure 4: Ride Fast Eat Ass Tattoo
Photo submitted by participant*

“Skate fast, eat ass” is a movement in the skating, riding, and cycling community which is used to describe the idea of riding or performing well, whereas “eating shit” is where you crash or wipe out. Since Aiden is an avid cyclist, he thought it would be comical to have this mantra tattooed on his body. Aiden’s experience highlighted the ways in which getting a tattoo without much meaning just for fun shows that he is carefree and goes with the flow, a desired quality in the skating/biking community. However, I believe this tattoo does have significant meaning to him as a member of this community and may have been done for the approval of his cycling peers.

Similarly, Kyle had two geometric designs on his right arm which he told me were designed and implemented solely because his tattoo artist wanted to do them. He said, “The geometric designs on my right arm, I have no idea what those are. They’re just for fun”. Just like Aiden, he had a carefree nature about him when discussing some of his tattoos. As part of this process, they both mentioned giving creative freedom to the artists

whom they both trusted and respected. Although Kyle was convinced that he had gotten these tattoos “just for fun”, being spontaneous and carefree are both respected values among college students which indicates that he may have also gotten these tattoos to increase his social capital. Kyle also illustrated the concept of varied meaning through his explanation of a few of his tattoos.

Jodi: So, what about your other tattoos? Tell me all about them...

Kyle: A lot of them don't have much meaning. I got this koi fish directly underneath my first tattoo. So, I got the first one on Monday and I got this one in the same week. I went back to back. I just thought it was cool, and the purple [color] looked great. So not much meaning to most of my tattoos. They're all for looks, but I do have a few specific ones with meaning. This dragonfly is meant to be a sign of good luck, but the same day I had this scheduled, I got fired from my job. I did end up getting it for free from my tattoo artist, she felt bad, so maybe it does have some good luck there.

Claire shared a similar experience with some of her tattoos having meaning, and others not really having an associated story. When I asked her if there was any meaning behind her tattoos she said:

I mean none of them have a ton of meaning. The Unalome does just because it's a Buddhist symbol, and my [astrological] sign, but the mountains I just went to go get a Friday the 13th tattoo on a whim with my friend. She was like, “let's go!” And literally I googled ‘tiny small tattoos’ and just picked the first one I saw that I liked. I was like “mountains, I like nature”. Most of mine have some sort of nature connotation like flowers because I don't know... I like nature, I like being outside, and I like flowers. So that's just kind of the theme with them. They don't have a ton of actual meaning with stories.

Aiden explained that while he gets some tattoos “for fun”, his leg sleeve does have “a lot of depth and meaning”. Through the following quotes, he clarifies the differences in his tattoo meaning. Originally, he said, “At this point I get tattoos for fun, so like it's not...there's not a huge meaning behind most of them anymore. I don't really have a reason for them. I just kind of like doing it. It makes my mom mad”. However, through the following narrative it is clear that he also has meaningful tattoos.

Jodi: Was there a certain tattoo that is your favorite, or is the most meaningful to you right now?

Aiden: Yeah, I feel like the biggest one is the most meaningful right now. I feel like it has a lot of depth and meaning. It goes all the way around [his calf and lower leg].

Jodi: Can you explain it to me?

Aiden: Yeah, so it's a ship, and an albatross in front of it, this is a crazy wave, and a lighthouse, and a flower on the back.

Jodi: Okay, what else is going on there?

Aiden: The flower was a free one and it was the first one I got from Felipe, and then I got a bunch more.

Jodi: Do you feel like your life is crazy? Or is there anything behind that, or you just like the design?

Aiden: I like the design a lot and it has a lot of musical references in it as well, and so it has a bunch of my favorite bands, which inspired the ideas behind it.

Jodi: That's really cool. So, music plays a big role in your life then?

Aiden: Oh yeah. Music and tattoos are a lot of my life.

Through his tattoo narrative, Aiden was able to further develop these ideas. Although he originally states that his tattoos are primarily “for fun,” he later explains that there is more meaning to some of his tattoos than he initially let on. Although he would not indulge me in the specific meanings of his leg sleeve, we can begin to see the ways in which his musical interests and passion for tattoos played an important role in his life.

The idea of getting tattoos with no associated meaning brought up several important questions. What does it mean to get a tattoo without meaning? What does it say about a person? What does that person want it to say about them? Are there gendered aspects of getting tattoos without meaning? As I began to explore these questions, I realized that they were extremely difficult questions for students to answer. Additionally, many students had not put much thought into why they were getting tattoos without meaning and what it said about them as individuals. However, these ideas will be further explored in chapter 3.

Specific Meaning

For Levi, the majority of his tattoos had specific meanings, which he easily conceptualized and explained. Like Benjamin and Samantha, he felt the need to justify his tattoo decisions to his parents, however he felt comfortable telling them the real reasons behind his tattoos. Unlike some of the other participants, when I asked Levi about his tattoos, it was as if he opened a book and pushed me in. He immediately told me about his tattoo motivation and the associated meanings behind them.

Jodi: Can you tell me about your tattoos? Is there a particular reason why you got them, starting with your first tattoo?

Levi: I have *Oh the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss. So that's the only book that I can remember my mom reading me as a kid growing up. And we always recite lines from that book whenever I go home, or anything. Or when life gets hard, she'll tell me this line from this book. So that was my first tattoo ever, on the side of my arm. I love this tattoo. This is my favorite tattoo I have. I look back and I'm like, "it's so simple and it's just nice. Also, he's walking into my armpit so it's funny". I also have a tree on my leg and that one is from [Lake] Tahoe. It's a sequoia. So, every summer for like 15 years, I went to [Lake] Tahoe for my birthday, for about three weeks at a time. Up until I moved to Texas. The first year that I stopped going every summer, I got this to kind of remember, "hey this is a huge part of your life. Going through every single summer and it molds you to be who you are", so that's why I got this one.

Jodi: Okay, and what about the cowboy on your arm?

Levi: So, I told my parents that he was for accepting that I'm finally Texan. I've kind of always grown up living the cowboy life. I grew up on a farm in California with horses, and chickens, and a tortoise. But I grew up on a ranch, and always had a pair of boots and everything. And I liked it too, art for the sake of art. I saw a girl post it on Instagram, and I messaged her like three months later and said, "hey I want this on my forearm," so yeah that's that guy.

In this way, Levi's tattoos were a way of telling the story of his life experiences and showing where he has been and where he is going, just like in the book, *Oh the Places You'll Go*. They traced his life from his memories of early childhood, to moving states, and eventually taking on a new identity as a Texan.

For Kyle and other students, the meaning behind some of his tattoos was tied to

his astrological sign and birth chart. He derived meaning from these key elements, which played a larger role in understanding his identity work. The fact that he was born in June was one of his main reasons for getting a rose on his chest.

So being born in June, it's my birth flower, so I have that. But roses myself, if I care about somebody, if I really love them, then I go out and buy flowers. So, roses have always been my symbol of my affection as well. Roses have always been a little more personal. I do follow the astrology stuff, and I am interested in all that. When I look at my sun, moon, and rising I feel connected to it. When I'm reading mine [astrological birth chart] I feel like, "this is dead on right now". It's always right about how I'm going to be taking things in life. It's been too accurate for the most part, so it's definitely a bigger thing for me.

From thinking about it as a way to guide one's life to seeing it as a way to understand experiences and relationships with others, astrology played a role in many students' tattoo work. For Kyle and other students, they described the fact that in order to understand your birth chart, you must know the time and place you were born. These are very intimate details about a person's entire existence, which produced meaning for many students' tattoos.

On the other hand, Samantha walked me through the reasoning behind why she got a matching coffee bean with one of her friends. Although some of her timing and motivation stemmed from the fact that it was free, she explained that with her matching tattoos it was important for her to have her own symbolic meaning behind it even if that meant developing the meaning over time. This is due in part to her belief that some things in life are temporary and that there are "seasons for different people". For her, the coffee bean symbolized the creation and maintenance of friendships and relationships with people in her life. She clarified by saying:

So coffee, you get coffee with people to get to know people. It's a very social and cool thing that we do and this idea that we can make connections with people that are really deep and cool. Because it is a tattoo that I got with a friend, so you can

have these deep connections with different people and there's also seasons for different people. Because in high school, I mean I still have some best friends from high school. But I don't talk to them every day, I talk to them like once every three months, so I think it's cool that we can make connections with people and keep in touch over long periods of time and those relationships change and that's okay. Because sometimes you want to hold on to those things and you can't. Because things change and that's okay, and that's just the natural way that things are. You can just let it happen. So that's what my coffee bean means.

While for some the meaning behind a tattoo is developed over time with the origins in meaning coming before the tattoo or appointment, Samantha's process was much different. For her, it was less about having a meaning that was developed organically over time, and more about being able to create and assign meaning at will. As long as she was able to create something meaningful out of her tattoo, she was happy with her tattoo decision.

Through hearing each student's personal motivations, design choices, and symbolic meanings and values, I was able to find connections within their stories. Even though each student had an individual tattoo narrative and their own decision-making processes, there were still observable patterns across the board. Additionally, I started to interpret that while having a well-developed tattoo narrative was valued culturally and among parents and older community members, getting tattoos for fun or on a whim was more valued among other college students.

III. TATTOO EXPERIENCE AND ASPECTS OF IDENTITY

I just breathe through it and embrace the pain. It's kind of a meditation thing which is kind of weird, but it's like, "I'm earning this by trying to stay calm and embracing it". It sounds so cheesy, but it is an intimate thing. I mean you're being stabbed by a needle.

–Claire, 21-year-old

Tattoo Experience

The tattoo experience is exactly that. It can be the determining factor that will influence whether or not a person becomes a return client, if they decide to get more tattoos, and if they will recommend a business or the general practice to others. This is particularly important for tattoo artists but is also an important event for the consumer, especially in terms of their first tattoo experience. In this section, I will discuss several aspects of the experience, including influential factors that may positively or negatively impact it.

Relationship with the Artist

During my interview with Claire, she stressed the importance of a person's tattoo experience. This included some design elements and planning. For Claire, this meant coordinating with the artist on where she would be getting the tattoo, in what style, as well as building a relationship between her and the artist. She explained:

It's the process and the whole experience of sharing and learning and growing and adding something to your body and becoming someone new in a way. It's almost transformative. Depending on what you're getting, I feel that that's different for everyone. Even if people don't think about it that deep, I feel like that's something you do experience in some form. And I think that's part of the reason that people get hooked on it and **especially why they go back to the same artist**. It's a good time. And even though it hurts, it's not a bad time. It's fun and you get to talk, and then it's over. It's kind of a prideful thing of like, "I sat here through this pain and did this and now I have this on my body". It's such an intimate

connection between you and your tattoo artist. It's a whole process and if you embrace and respect the art of it then it is a whole thing. And it's fun! You get to chat with someone and hear about their life and hear stories. It's not just about, "this is on my arm now," it's a whole experience of deciding what you want and **where** you want it, and **what style** you want it in and **planning** it out **with the artist** and getting to know the artist while you're getting it, and making connections and that way you want to go back. It's like tattoo culture.

In *Lighting Up*, Nichter (2015, 36) describes the intimate nature of cigarettes and how they may be used as a "social lubricant" to "meet people or establish formal relationships" due to the fact that they can make it easier to start conversations since it is "something new to immediately relate to someone else". Similarly, as Claire mentioned, the nature of tattooing is intimate and can create a connection between a person and their artist. Depending on the area being tattooed, clients are often undressed to a certain extent and are expected to lie still while a potential stranger "stabs you with a needle". Even though she addressed several aspects of her overall experience, Claire reiterated the importance of the shared relationship between her and the artist. While people may stress the importance of different aspects of the experience, through my participants' narratives, I found that for most, getting to know their artist influenced their comfort level.

Several of my participants revealed that becoming friends with their artist made them feel more comfortable and less "vulnerable" during the tattooing experience. Levi also emphasized the importance of the relationship with his tattoo artists. He expressed that for him, this relationship did not have to be particularly "deep," however it was important to share mutual respect for one another as well as respect for the art. Additionally, participants explained that befriending your tattoo artist increased collaboration and willingness to spend time together planning a tattoo.

When I asked about students' tattoo experiences, some shared that they had bad

first experiences, but continued to get tattoos, although at different shops. While listening to these stories, I began to notice that cost levels were associated with comfort levels across the board. Raven told me all about her first tattoo and how she had chosen this particular “sketchy” shop due to the fact that she was underage, low on funds, and wanted to stay under the radar. She said:

I was looking for a place that was also really cheap. So, I found myself in sort of a really underserved area. We knew there was a lot of crime. It was really weird as a young lady going in there. Originally my friend had come with me, but she had to go and fight with her boyfriend or something. So, I was there for a couple hours with these strangers and the tattoo artist was really weird. He had somebody bring him food and he was like, “feed it to me mama”. And so, I was like oh my god, I was so scared, and like, “ahhhh!”. So, I’ve got my fork and I’m just giving him meatballs like, “c’mon dude get on with it”. Yeah and then also the second time I went back—that was the first time I saw a gun in the wild, y’know like out of context, like not a range or something or at somebody’s ranch.

After her second appointment, Raven never returned to that shop, but she did continue getting tattoos. Her new thought process was along the lines of, “you get what you pay for,” so she now spends more time researching tattoo shops and investing in quality artists.

Kyle mentioned that he gave all agency to his tattoo artist, who he had trusted to design and plan all 20 of his current tattoos. For him, the process was about coming up with an idea, but letting his artist make all the stylistic choices including color, size, and style. For Kyle, the relationship of trust between him and his artist was essential to his desired tattoo experience.

Jodi: How did you choose that design?

Kyle: I actually did not. I chose the symbol, and said I liked cherry blossoms and my tattoo artist just came up with the rest. I haven’t picked the design on anything. I’ve given her free range on all my work.

Jodi: So, what about the location? A lot of people I’ve talked to don’t really want visible tattoos for their first tattoos, so what influenced that decision to get it on your forearm?

Kyle: I wanted people to see it, it was right there on my arm and I just wanted it to pop. I get questions about it of course, and it gets talked about and I can show it off.

For Kyle, an important part of the planning process was not planning anything at all. He enjoyed “staying out of the way” and letting his artist plan and control his tattoo experience.

Similarly, when discussing his design choices, it was clear that Aiden was fairly removed from the process. When I asked him if a lot of planning goes into his tattoo work, he laughed and said:

No, I really planned out one of them which was my moth down here [signals to moth tattoo at base of ankle and start of leg sleeve], so I planned that one out. And the rest of it... I got a free one, and the whole leg sleeve was a combined effort between me and one of the artists, but I was mostly like, “hey can you do something really cool on my leg,” and then he did.

Although he expressed concerns about his school and work life, his tattoo decisions were one aspect of his life where he freely gave up control and creative freedom to the artist.

Types of Shops

In addition to tattoo shops being notoriously cheaper in less desirable areas, chain tattoo shops typically have a lower shop minimum, the lowest price an artist is allowed to charge for the smallest and simplest designs, and longer hours in order to attract more walk-ins. Walk-ins are often smaller or simpler designs—which take less time to mass produce. Walk-in clients help speed up the tattooing process as well, since artists feel less need to build rapport with this type of customer. In contrast, the other type of clientele at tattoo shops are return clients, who generally book their appointments ahead of time with their desired artist.

Local shops are more likely to form relationships and take the time to build

rapport with their clients. Generally, these artists are more invested in providing a comfortable experience for the customer and tattoo more custom pieces, rather than those pulled from Pinterest or Instagram. They often close their doors earlier to avoid the “drunk and spontaneous” crowd. Although making money is important to them, especially since they may experience slower periods due to less influx of foot traffic, they are often the ones who give away the most tattoos for free.

From my observations in three tattoo shops in San Marcos and my conversations with interview participants, the layout of the shop plays an important role in the comfort of the person being tattooed as well. For example, some shops have private rooms where people will be tattooed, while others have an open floor plan where each person is being tattooed in one large room. Other influencers relating to comfort levels may be the type of music the shop or artist chooses to play, if they have a loud (coil) or quiet (rotary) machine, how much they choose to converse with their client, and the gender of the artist. From my observations in three different shops, I noticed that people were more likely to have in-depth or more personal conversations if they were being tattooed in a private room. It seemed as if the artist and client alike felt the need to fill the space with conversation in these cases, whereas with an open floor plan it made sense for everyone to be quiet if no one was conversing. Ethan said, “sometimes it’s nice to just focus on the work and not have to put on a show or force small talk”.

Hand Work

As previously mentioned, the art of tattooing is an intimate and vulnerable process for the person obtaining the tattoo without the added stress of a potentially bad or scarring tattoo experience. In this situation, another influencer in determining if someone

will have a good or bad tattoo experience is an artist's handwork. Tattoo artists may be known for having a light or heavy hand, meaning the pressure they apply when tattooing is either softer and less deep or deeper and more painful, which can lead to discomfort or scarring. Having a light hand is associated with being talented and taking ones time, while being heavy handed is associated with being careless, rushed, and less experienced.

An artist's handwork can be vital to the success or survival of their career. Like with anything else, rumors of a heavy-handed artist travel fast. In order to protect both the participant's and tattooer's anonymity, names and photos will not be used for this section. At the start of 2019, a new artist finished their apprenticeship at a well-regarded shop in San Marcos. Their designs were excellent, and they seemed incredibly advanced for a new artist with little experience. I began inquiring about this particular artist after hearing their name everywhere and seeing their distinctive style and colors displayed around town. Once the excitement of a new tattoo wore off and the healing process should have been completed, I began to hear less positive talk about this artist and more people commenting on the scars, fading, and regret they had experienced. One student said:

I mean, they [the artist] have talent, there's no denying it. But they shouldn't be out on their own so soon. I mean, I have scars that will never heal, and I'm not the only one.

While doing observations, I began to ask about participant's experiences and how they felt about their "healed" tattoos whenever I saw this particular artist's work. I heard from five different people about how painful it was to be tattooed by the artist, that the clients each had deep pitting scars associated with a heavy hand, the slowness that seemed to drag on for many more hours than necessary, and most importantly how they

would not be returning to that artist. These students all addressed a serious issue and a negative tattoo experience that will inform the rest of their tattoo decisions. For some students, this meant that they would not be returning to that artist, while others more drastically no longer wanted to associate with that shop.

Identity and Evolving Ideals

From speaking with these students, I found that tattoos are closely related to their identities. Students described their tattoos as being “a part of them”, “a way of expressing themselves”, and “as a representation of this season of life”. These responses informed my understanding of how intertwined identity and tattoo practices actually are. I noticed there were two main ways that students categorized and conceptualized identity; these were spiritually and physically. In addition, even though students’ tattoos were related to aspects of their identities, they still followed observable cultural patterns.

Many students described getting tattoos as a way of expressing themselves during particular “seasons of life”. When I asked if students felt their tattoos were representative of their identity, Samantha said,

I think that they change over time. Because it’s like, you change over time, which is cool. But I think that they all have this, not like a timestamp, but kind of. It’s like that’s who I was at this season of my life and so that’s why I wanted this because everyone always hits me with the, “in 30 years you’re gonna regret it” And I’m like, “okay, I don’t think that I will”. And I know that everyone thinks that but also, I knew going in that in 30 years I could hate it. But when I look at it, I remember where I was, what I was doing, I remember the season of life that I was in, and why I got it and all of the feelings and things surrounding that. So, it’s like a diary, but not a diary. But then it changes too, which is cool.

For her, the permanence of her tattoo meaning did not necessarily matter. She was more concerned with the gratification of capturing her feelings now, and less worried about the longevity of that feeling. Aiden had a similar mentality. When I asked if he

felt his tattoos represented his current self, he said:

Yeah for sure. I think that... And I don't know how that's going to age or if it will, but it could be bad. I don't know if it's only representing me as my current state, which in that case it's an identity that I will carry throughout life but also if it happens to be where it's just who I am now, and as I get older I don't like it anymore, it's a grounding in reality that this is a decision that I made at this time and so having that forever is not a consequence to me necessarily. It's just a part of life.

Although Aiden was unsure of how his tattoos would “age”, he still believed he would be content with his tattoo decisions in the future since they were a part of him and representative of his identity at a particular time.

Physical Characteristics

Other students measured their identity based on physical characteristics such as how much visible surface area their tattoos covered. This was the case for Benjamin and Kyle. While Benjamin did not have that many tattoos, all of his pieces were quite large, covering both sides of his forearms in traditional thick black ink. He said, “I mean since they are so obviously there, you can't hide it. It's kind of like, ‘that's a part of me’. There's no hiding them”. As for Kyle, he had almost a full-sticker-style-sleeve on his left arm with Asian-inspired designs in more of a Neo-Traditional style with vibrant greens, purples, reds, and other vibrant colors. Neo-traditional, a modern form of the American traditional tattoo style or “old school” style, incorporates bold lines, realism, and a broader range of colors than traditionally used. When I asked him if he felt having tattoos was part of his identity, he chuckled and said:

I think at this point it is, the fact that I have tattoos. Obviously, it's a part of me now. It's not something I go out of my way to have them [people] notice. I mean if I meet someone at the river for the first time obviously you will see everything. I'm very open about it so I'll show them off then, but that's pretty much it with that. But I love them. I love talking about them and just showing them off when I can when I'm out in public. I get a lot of cool looks for them. I have no issues

though with aging and how they're going to look later. They're just going to look like old tattoos.

Although Kyle and Benjamin had different motives, these students both agreed that their tattoos played a role in shaping a person's first impression of them. By expressing their identity through their tattoo decisions, students may enact style through symbolism and material culture (Mendoza-Denton 2008).

Social Media

Social media has an overwhelmingly large presence in the lives of emerging adults. Having grown up during the social media boom, this age group has become experts in navigating technology and social media to fit their needs. For my project, I asked students about their social media usage, if they used it to find/follow artists, to explore tattoo ideas, and how each site is used to either display or conceal their tattoos. I have also included my observations and personal experiences.

Specific Use of Sites

From my personal experience, as well as my interviews I found that students used a variety of different sites, each for different reasons. The most commonly mentioned site was Instagram, followed by Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest.

Instagram was the most fruitful for discovering artists, following artists they liked, seeing new flash designs, posting photos of their tattoos, and using the 'tagged photo feature' to see more of the artist's work than just what they have posted. Kingsley was particularly enthused about this subject and said:

Instagram is the best thing that's ever come out for tattoos I feel like. Because it's like, artists will recommend other artists. When I first got my first tattoo, I was using google reviews and it's okay it's Google but it's not... The best recommendation and the best compliment someone can give an artist is posting and saying "look at this tattoo I just got, by this artist" and it's like holy shit and

you can go to their Instagram and look at their tagged pictures to see what other people have gotten. And it's way better than Google or going on their official website. But yeah Instagram, greatest thing ever.

In the past, tattoo shops primarily showcased their portfolio and new flash designs on specific websites for each shop. These were helpful to a certain extent, but typically had bad quality photos, were rarely updated, and made contacting artists difficult and time consuming. Levi expressed that he used Instagram's messaging feature as a way to feel out the vibe of an artist. He said:

It's cool you can reach out to tattoo artists easier. Seeing their designs and kind of vibing with them before I go to their shop. I could never imagine not getting along with a tattoo artist and sitting there silently for two hours. It would be awful. So, I kind of message them a little bit and see how they are. Feel out the vibe a little. But it [social media] has played a huge role in me getting tattoos and seeing them become more normalized... it's a thing that kind of made me wanna get tattoos.

Although there are messaging features on other apps, Levi points out that Instagram's features make it easy to both see the designs of artists and get to know them a bit before going under the needle.

Instagram's many features also allow artists to post their new designs immediately. You can even take photos through the app and post them directly. Another feature of this particular app is that you can have all of the artists you wish to follow in one place, rather than scanning multiple websites for content. Although many shops still have a website, which some artists link on their Instagram profile, they are typically only used for booking the actual appointments. Benjamin agreed with this idea and said:

A lot of shops aren't good about updating their stuff online, so you have to go to social media. And even then, a lot of artists don't post a lot. But I think social media is a great resource. It's a great portfolio for anyone doing anything creative.

Other students expressed that they used Instagram to follow artists in their area, find cool

ideas for future tattoo inspiration, reach out to artists, as well as give credit to the artist who tattooed them. This was especially important to Levi and Kyle. On this note they said:

Levi: I use Instagram mainly. After I get a tattoo, I'll usually take a picture of me doing something normal and then tag the artist in it just to give them a shoutout and get my friends to go to them. It's a huge thing I've been doing since I've been getting tattoos. I feel like it's super beneficial when an artist has their social media updated.

Kyle: My tattoo artist does like to take photos and she posts them. I'm more than happy to help out with that. So, I send her photos of those and she posts them herself.

Both Levi and Kyle felt that giving credit to the artists was an important way to respect the art of tattooing and the artistic community. By allowing artists to post pictures of their work and tagging them in pictures that displayed their distinctive tattoo style, they were able to further spread their influence and advertise their craft.

I was also interested in how students choose to display or conceal their tattoos on social media sites, which sites they post on, and the reasons behind these actions. I found that students most often post pictures of their tattoos on Instagram and Twitter. Students also said that they either did not have a Facebook account, did not frequently use their Facebook account, or that they avoid posting pictures of their tattoos because that is the site where they have the most family members as friends. I had two students mention the use of Snapchat when displaying tattoos, however for the students I interviewed this platform had become less important in comparison to Instagram and Twitter.

I found that Instagram was the primary site used to display tattoos through either posting pictures to their page or posting photos on their story which were only viewable for 24 hours. I found that students mostly used the story feature to post new tattoos at the

time they were getting them, after they were done, or when they had healed. Some students mentioned that they might post a photo at a tattoo shop, but not actually post the tattoo in order to stir curiosity in their followers without revealing anything on their end.

Claire said:

I might have posted a picture in front of the mirror at Cosmic Ink, but our tattoos aren't even in the picture, you have no idea what we are doing there. So, it's kind of just this mystery thing.

Along the same lines, other students were insistent that they do not intentionally display or conceal their tattoos when posting to Instagram. However, many of these responses were contradicted at some point throughout the interview. For example, Kyle initially told me that he did not post photos of his tattoos as to not be "flashy with them," however he later said that he enjoyed "showing them off" in person.

Where some students are more conspicuous about displaying their tattoos online, others were more open about how they showed off their new ink. Both Benjamin and Kingsley admitted to purposefully posting pictures of their tattoos on Instagram in order to show off their new designs. They said:

Benjamin: My friends all have tattoos for the most part so when I get one it's like, "oh hey I got a new one". Usually I'll just post on Instagram or something and whoever wants to see it sees it. I usually don't try and conceal them; I always try and show them.

Kingsley: Whenever I first got my tattoos, I did that thing where you post and intentionally show them off. Not going to lie when I take pictures of me tanning, I always make sure to get this thigh piece in.

Benjamin and Kingsley were both proud to display their tattoos and mentioned posting them to other sites as well. Other students also expressed a carefree attitude about posting new tattoo pictures to Instagram for their followers to see.

After Instagram, Twitter was the second largest platform where students openly

displayed their tattoos. This may be attributed to the fact that many students have an even smaller following of close friends on Twitter than they do on Instagram. Additionally, my participants mentioned that they had even less family members on Twitter than they did Instagram. Students mentioned this was due to the fact that Twitter is used primarily as a platform to joke about their lives through memes, funny or more risky photos typically not posted on Instagram, and other forms of self-deprecating humor.

Although students did mention the use of Twitter to post photos of their tattoos, they did not explain these actions in great detail. Rather the mention of Twitter was more of a side comment to a larger commentary on Instagram. For example, Benjamin mentioned that he typically posts his new tattoos “on Twitter and Instagram like, ‘oh hey I got a new one,’ and then continued to discuss his usage of Instagram with no further clarification on his Twitter use. This may be due to the fact that Twitter is a simpler social media platform, with only one way to post photos, unlike Instagram’s many diverse features. Only one student claimed to post their tattoo photos to Twitter more than Instagram, which he later specified was to avoid upsetting his mom since she does not like his tattoos. When I asked if he usually displays or conceals his tattoos on social media he said:

Aiden: On Instagram I only have two pictures that show my tattoos. So, I don’t really display them very much.

Jodi: Okay so you conceal a little bit more.

Aiden: Yeah.

Jodi: What would be the reason behind that?

Aiden: My mom doesn’t like it, so she gets upset with me for it.

Jodi: Okay so you don’t just want to broadcast it to her?

Aiden: Mhmm.

Jodi: Would you say that there are certain sites where you display more?

Aiden: Definitely on twitter.

Although many students did not claim to prefer one site over the other between

Instagram and Twitter, I definitely heard more responses in reference to posting on Instagram. In terms of getting ideas for tattoos and tattoo inspiration, the site most frequently mentioned was Pinterest. Pinterest is a site where people can find inspiration for fashion, recipes, home décor, DIY crafts, and many other helpful ideas.

Out of my 15 participants, 5 students specifically mentioned using Pinterest as a starting point to find tattoo inspiration and designs before taking them to an artist to be modified to the artist's personal style. Pinterest was the only site that sparked controversy among the students. While some felt it was okay to take designs directly from Pinterest, other students felt it was wrong to "steal an artist's work" or "photocopy a tattoo". From my conversations with artists, I found that people will commonly bring in these borrowed designs from Pinterest, to which they will often refuse to replicate without putting their own twist on the original design.

Overall, all of my participants had used social media in some way involving their tattoos, whether it be by posting, researching and following artists, looking for designs, or tattoo shops. While some students used the sites primarily to research new designs, many were invested in the ways they displayed or concealed their tattoos from certain audiences on specific sites in order to increase or maintain social capital (Bourdieu 1986). This work aligns with the idea that emerging adults are more interested in seeking approval from peers than family. These students discuss the use of primarily visual platforms such as Instagram where their followers are other people who are similar in age, personal beliefs, and values.

Future Plans

Due to the permanent nature of tattoos, many people assume that decision-making

processes that inform tattoo choices are based in plans for the future. Since my sample population are traditional college students, there is also an assumption that these students are working towards a degree with a future career in mind. For this section, I discuss responses which mentioned ideas about the future, how tattoos will age, how they will like or dislike their tattoos in the future, mention of jobs, relationships, and plans to get more tattoos.

Employment

One of the main things I hear in response to people seeing my tattoos is, “What about your future?” or “Who is going to hire you?”. Although these comments come primarily from baby boomers, they are starkly different from the praise and respect I hear from other emerging adults, who mostly fall into the millennial category. Due to the number of comments I receive on a day to day basis, I expected more students to express concern for their future careers. However, this was distinctly not the case. Students felt that their tattoos would not inhibit them from getting jobs in many professional and non-professional career fields including nursing, dancing, accounting, anthropology, studio metals, and primatology.

Although students were not overly concerned about their employability due to their tattoos, many did avoid being tattooed in “stigmatized” areas such as their face, neck, and hands as not to inhibit their chances of getting a job. Even though Kyle had twenty tattoos, with some on his hands, he was still able to conceal his tattoos to a point where he was not too worried about a future career in nursing. He said:

Of course, if you're a nurse, you can't...you have to look a certain way. The hands can't be touched, you can't have neck tattoos, you can't look a certain way. So that's kind of influenced placement of tattoos, I will say that. So just kind of being focused on whatever I might do in the future, having tattoos could mess

things up for me, essentially, at that point.

Kyle also told me that he hoped to be “totally tatted” eventually, but he wanted to wait until he had secured a career to get his neck and behind his ear tattooed. Kingsley, another nursing student said that he did not worry about his tattoo placement as much since his uniform at work allowed him to be mostly covered. When I asked if he was worried about future employment because of his tattoos he said:

Not really because I’m going for nursing and I’d just wear scrubs and for most interviews I’d wear pants of course. But I don’t think it’ll ever affect my adult life or my career life. Most hospitals don’t care about tattoos. Most nurses can have tattoos.

In the same way, Aiden expressed that he did not think his tattoos would limit his ability to get a job since his ideal career as an accountant would require him to wear a button down and long pants. He felt fortunate in this aspect that his sixteen or so tattoos would not interfere with his career. He said:

Yeah no, with employment I think I’ve avoided areas that will prohibit me from getting a job. So, I can pretty much get whatever I want tattooed, yeah.

Claire told me that she was not concerned for her future career because she felt that tattoos are “becoming more normalized” regardless of the fact that her parents and older generations had warned her that it may be hard to get a job with visible tattoos. However, since her dream career was to be self-employed as a metal smith, she believed she would have freedom over her appearance. I found Claire’s comments to be helpful in understanding how many of my participants felt on this issue. She smirked and said:

Yeah so like no one cares. Metal smiths have neck tattoos and stuff [laughs]. But I feel like that was a big concern at the beginning because that’s something they kind of drill into your head, by your parents. And it’s also like more people are getting tattoos now and it’s becoming more normalized. And also, the older generations are kind of like slowly kind of turning out and we’re going to take

over. That's just how it works—people die. So, I think it's going to be a little more casual, especially once our generation are bosses and stuff. Because we're going to be tatted. We're all going to be tatted.

Part of Claire's career outlook was also based in the fact that she would not want to work for someone who was a "stickler" and felt her tattoos were offensive or unprofessional. She said, "none of my tattoos are vulgar in any way or inappropriate. If someone has a problem with flowers, then they might have a bigger problem". As previously mentioned, Arnett (2012) suggests that emerging adults are more vested in their personal pursuits and are postponing stereotypical milestones of past generations such as having children and entering the workforce. From Claire, Aiden, and Kyle's narratives, it is clear that they are not widely concerned about the opinions and concerns of older generations regarding tattoos in the workplace, but rather are more vested in expressing their current state through their tattoos.

Claire described the process of getting tattoos as an "ongoing journey" which summed it up pretty well. About half of my participants told me they wanted to get the majority of their body tattooed at some point and that the goal was not to achieve a certain number of tattoos, but rather to "fill up space". Aiden was able to demonstrate this concept through our conversation.

Aiden: Well so yeah... it's mostly space. So, since I got my knee tattoo, I feel like it just looks very empty, so I want to add there. And my stomach—I got my first stomach one, so I feel like there's a lot of empty space now and I want more. And upper leg I don't have anything up there so like more...

Jodi: More, more, more.

Aiden: Yeah, there's a lot of open area but it's like if I didn't have one here... I wouldn't even consider this an issue. But specifically, like right here I need something right there.

Jodi: That makes sense.

Aiden: Yeah, so it's just like whenever you get something you need more.

Jodi: To fill in the space?

Aiden: Exactly.

Kyle experienced the same issue where every time he got a new tattoo, he felt it created an empty spot to fill for his next one. He said:

Placement wise I just try to fill the areas that I have open. Typically, on my arms I try to go for the next spot up where I can fit it. So the back part of my tricep is the next spot and then I'll be done.

Other students planned their next tattoos based on particular artists and when they would be able to get an appointment with them, travel to them, or afford to get a tattoo from them. Levi mentioned that he had “four tattoos lined up with different artists right now”, while Jack, a 23-year-old political science major, was trying to plan a trip to Japan in order to have his Japanese inspired sleeve filled in with color. Likewise, Samuel was saving the left side of his body for an artist out of Rome who he found on Instagram, named Ruko, while Kingsley was waiting by his phone for an Instagram notification that Mason Ball Tattooer had an opening.

Overall, I found that students were not consumed with concerns of what older people thought about their tattoo decisions long term or how their tattoos would affect them in the future, although some did practice caution by avoiding tattoos around stigmatized areas such as the face, neck, and hands. Rather, students were increasingly interested in the opinions of their peers and how their tattoos would elevate their social status. Additionally, I found that one student was actually more concerned about how his tattoos would affect him as a future parent than as a job applicant. When I asked Aiden if he felt his tattoos would affect his life after college, he said:

Aiden: I've actually like kind of had some fears about being a dad with tattoos.

Jodi: Really?

Aiden: 'Cause my stepdad has a tattoo but he only had one tattoo and he always

told me how terrible it was, and so I was always a little nervous to get my first one because he told me how bad the experience was... But I'm kind of nervous as a person who wants to have kids—possibly... one day, what my kids will think of it and what their friends and their families will think of it, depending on where I live and stuff.

Jodi: Yeah, okay... so your main fear is not about employment... you are just kind of afraid of the judgement and stigma that might come with that from kids and family members?

Aiden: Yeah and also what if my kids think it's lame?

Aiden and my other interview participants helped demonstrate the degree to which students are less concerned than ever by how their tattoos will influence their future careers and hirability. This is just one of many distinguishable characteristics of current emerging adults as an age group and generation.

IV. RELATIONSHIP INFLUENCE ON TATTOO PERCEPTIONS

My stepmom was like, “so you drink whiskey, you have tattoos, do you smoke too?” It’s like no, why are you stereotyping me right now? I think that especially older people have the idea that tattoos mean you are a delinquent. I’m like, “what do you mean, I’m still the same person?”.

–Samantha, 21-year-old

Relationships and Perceptions

Relationships may take many forms and can be difficult to navigate in any sense. When tattoos are factored in, many students found that their relationships became increasingly challenging to manage. Primarily, I found that in some cases, students spent time and effort in attempts to conceal their tattoos from family members. For some students, this meant planning to wear long sleeves or pants to conceal their tattoos even after their family members knew about the tattoo in order to show respect. For this section, I focused on the ways in which having/getting tattoos have affected relationships with other people such as friends, family, and even strangers. This may also include how relationships changed and contributing factors.

Perceptions from Strangers

While many students were concerned about their parent’s perceptions of their tattoos, many also struggled with how other people perceive them. In particular, students were concerned with how strangers may view their tattoos. A major attraction for students at this university is the nearby river. Due to the proximity to campus, many students mentioned the fact that although some of their tattoos may typically be concealed, being at the river allows for friends, classmates, and strangers alike to view

their ink. Aiden said:

But just like being at the river, it's just that nobody cares but I've also heard through friends of friends like, "wow that guy looks intimidating... I don't know if I can talk to him". And so... I don't like that necessarily.

For Aiden, he was most concerned that he would be perceived as a "tough guy" and "unapproachable", to which he laughed and said was "definitely not true". Kingsley was also concerned with how people would view him at the river but assured me that he typically received only praise for his thigh tattoos that are revealed when he wears his swim trunks. He said:

Yesterday I went floating and when I got out of the water, two people were like, "wow I love your tattoo". Anytime anyone sees it and says something positive, I just love it. It's my favorite tattoo.

While Kingsley did have a good experience with other college students acknowledging his tattoos at the river, he mentioned that he sometimes received criticism from older generations about his tattoos. This included his grandparents from Vietnam, who were scared of his tattoos due to their cultural beliefs. He said:

My grandma said, "I like the design, but I'm afraid of it". Because in Vietnam it's only affiliated with the bad people or perceived as bad people in society. Like gang members and all of that. My uncle who lives in Vietnam still is younger than my dad and he just never came to the U.S. He doesn't have any tattoos. But my dad who came to the U.S. when he was 16, he has like four tattoos now. So, I think it's cultural, definitely. In other countries like Japan, tattoos are great. But I think in Vietnam they aren't there yet.

Kingsley's narrative is helpful in understanding the ways in which tattoo prevalence and acceptance varies widely based on cultural and regional beliefs. Although some students enjoyed showing off their tattoos while others were more concerned about receiving negative perceptions, all students spoke to a sense of vulnerability which may be experienced by emerging adults. Arnett (2004) explains that a key feature of emerging

adulthood is the instability of their lives which can be seen through frequent changes in work, education, and both platonic and romantic relationships. While many students become accustomed to this instability in their daily lives, they are still prone to feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability as they navigate these drastic changes. As a result, some students end up seeking tattoos to gain agency and control.

Relationships with Friends and Peers

Some students mentioned a small degree of approval from family members, which was typically expressed as admiration from parents without tattoos. On the other hand, students with tattooed parents mentioned that they received less judgement and pressure from family members about their tattoo decisions, especially when their parents were heavily tattooed.

Both Kyle and Benjamin expressed excitement to share their new tattoos with their friends. In addition to posting his new tattoos on his Instagram story, Benjamin said he liked to show his other friends with tattoos as soon as he gets them. Kyle mentioned how some people expect a story or explanation to accompany new tattoos, but even though many of his do not have specific meanings, he still enjoyed sharing his with friends and his parents who both have “sleeves and back tattoos”.

From my observations and interviews, I found that the majority of approval and praise for student’s tattoos came from friends and other students experiencing a similar life stage, especially those who had tattoos as well. When I asked Aiden if there was someone he was most excited to share his new tattoos with, he mentioned his friend Matt who “has a lot of tattoos”. For students, this process of eagerly displaying tattoos can be seen as an exchange of cultural capital and in order to gain reciprocity with other tattooed

individuals (Bourdieu 1986).

Gender

While exploring themes of judgement and stigma, I noticed differences in how women and men were enacting gender. For example, the men I spoke to were often proud of their tattoos and tried to display them in order to gain attention, especially from women. Ethan said, “guys will do just about anything, including getting tattoos, to get a woman’s attention”.

As for my female participants, I noticed the social aspects of getting tattoos. They mentioned taking at least one friend with them, if not more, to their appointments. Sometimes they even got matching tattoos or both friends would get a tattoo at the same time in order to share the experience. Although one previous study found tattoo motivation to be tied to self-expression, other research is consistent with my findings that some students do get tattoos in solidarity with peers (King and Vidourek 2013). In this way, getting tattoos created approval, aided participants in maintaining important relationships, and increased social capital.

Benjamin provided a perfect example of how male students decided to display their tattoos, even in cases where they believed they would receive criticism or judgment for having them. When I asked Benjamin if he tended to display or conceal his tattoos, he laughed and said:

I usually don’t try and conceal them. I always try and show them. So, I met my girlfriend’s parents and she had said that when she got her tattoo they really disapproved of it. So, I didn’t know if they would disapprove of my tattoos so I kind of put them out there. I wore short sleeves, and I went to her sister’s wedding and I had on a long-sleeved shirt but I rolled the sleeves up so you could see them.

On the other hand, the women I interviewed were more concerned about what

other people may think about their tattoo decisions and took measures to avoid scrutiny such as spending more time deciding on tattoo designs and placement than other male students. This may be attributed to the fact that studies involving American college students have found that when shown pictures of women with and without tattoos, “women with tattoos may be perceived as less attractive, less caring, and less intelligent or less honest and religious, depending on the type of tattoo,” (Broussard and Harton 2018, 522; Resenhoef et al. 2008). Claire mentioned that she believed her tattoos added to who she is as a person but was worried people would take them at face value and judge her solely on her visual appearance. She said:

If people see my tattoos before they meet me, I mean people are going to be quick to judge usually. I don't know what people think of them or how they judge me because I don't know. But I feel like if people were just to see my body, based on my tattoos before they got to know me, they would either think I was super basic or they would be like oh this girl is a nature freak, or they would be like oh cool she has tattoos. I don't know.

Additionally, female students mentioned getting matching tattoos with other female friends as well as going together to their tattoo appointments, whereas only one male student I interviewed mentioned a matching tattoo that he had gotten with his girlfriend. One explanation for this is that women tend to focus on building meaningful connections with other women. Samantha had multiple matching tattoos with friends but decided to get a matching coffee bean on her arm for this reason. She said:

Because it is a tattoo that I got with a friend, so you can have these deep connections with different people and there's also seasons for different people.

For these women, the act of getting a matching tattoo helped form group identity and increase solidarity between them.

Another explanation for female students attending tattoo appointments together is

to avoid the risk of sexual assault, crude comments, gestures, and objectification from male tattoo artists. One study found that artists at a tattoo shop in Los Angeles would unnecessarily objectify, fondle, and make comments or gestures about women's bodies (Santos 2009). Being a woman increases the risk of being sexually assaulted, as one in every five women are sexually assaulted while in college (Miller et al. 1996). Raven experienced this type of discomfort firsthand during her first tattoo appointment. She said:

I was there by myself and it really hit me, and I was like, “okay this is scary”. For me, I’m not used to all that stuff. I feel like I’m a little bit tougher since then, but it was definitely a memorable experience. The whole thing was extremely weird and then at that point during the second session—we were about halfway done, and he was like, “so how old are you?”.

Raven was one of six female students that I interviewed, which aligns closely with the mentioned statistic. Due to her experience, she mentioned that she did bring a friend to her second session, which made her feel more comfortable even though the uncomfortable comments continued.

I was also interested in understanding other gendered aspects of tattooing. I wanted to know if there were more male or female tattoo artists in San Marcos; however I was not able to gain entry to each tattoo shop and therefore do not have data on that subject. Additionally, I would have liked to further explore the possibility of gender differences in design choice or location between men and women, but found them to share similar designs and locations with both male and female participants concealing some tattoos among my participants.

Tattoo Community

A tattoo community is a group of people who all share the common experience of having tattoos. Similar to many groups, a tattoo community may share specific requirements for membership and include various sub-groups. As previously mentioned, one way in which youth construct identity is through communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). Through the mutual interest of tattoos and group activity of getting tattooed with other people, individuals with tattoos may belong to a shared community of practice. In order to understand the tattoo community of San Marcos, it is important to define what requirements constitute membership or entry to the group, whether or not someone identifies as a member and why, and how identity is negotiated within the group.

From my interviews, I found that size and number of tattoos were direct factors that students felt contributed to membership of the tattoo community in San Marcos. In this way, having a greater number of larger tattoos was valued by the tattoo community, making them a form of cultural capital. Claire was aware that often times people with a greater number of tattoos as well as larger tattoos are more respected than those with fewer, smaller tattoos. She said:

I don't know, I feel like before I got the bigger one, I felt like a tattoo wuss. I just had two little tiny ones. I'd like to feel like there's not, but sometimes I feel like there is. But then it's like once you get to bigger tattoos and more tattoos it's like some people respect you more for that. I don't really see the difference, but I know that other people do, and I can kind of feel that sometimes. When I first got my first two smaller ones my family friend was like, "yeah you don't actually have tattoos". I don't think it should matter, but I have gotten vibes from other people that it does, ya know?

From Claire's narrative, it's clear that some people do feel as if having a greater number of larger tattoos serves as a gatekeeper to the tattoo community and that they are willing

to make that information known. However, it is also important to address the importance of context when understanding cultural capital. While numerous large tattoos are valued within the tattoo community, they are stigmatized in other social settings such as among family members.

Many students were also unsure of their role in the tattoo community. This may be used to highlight the complicated nature of membership and the various levels that they may employ depending on a person's definition or perception of what that might be. For example, even though Kyle was almost finished with one of his arm sleeves, he admitted that he did feel like he was a part of the tattoo community but spoke to the complex understanding of what that entailed. He said:

You know I've thought about, not necessarily the number because I know my number is kind of high in comparison but I do have a lot of smaller pieces, they just take up a whole lot of space and I feel like with the space being said, I know a lot of people who have full sleeves but that's all they have is just that. And I have little tattoos coming into a sleeve itself. So I feel like there could be stigma about being sleeved up and it's like oh well I'm just in the process. So I don't know—I don't have that judgement for myself as in "I'm not there yet" but I do believe I am a part of the tattoo community because obviously the amount that I have. But in comparison to most, like my friends, they are sleeved up and have one big piece. I think for people it's just their mindset. Maybe someone who has a full connected sleeve feels like they are a little better than those who don't. They're like, "I did all my stuff all at once vs you who has different placements here and there".

Kyle's quote exemplifies the relationship between number and size of tattoos as well.

On the other hand, Evan did not feel he was a member of the tattoo community, even though he did feel aspects of the community at times due to the fact that his tattoos have allowed him to meet people in his age group. He said:

Having tattoos has let me meet more people. Most people in our age group have tattoos anyway, so it's kind of a community thing but I don't feel that I am a part of the tattoo community. It's a very niche community, and it's a very intense community. When I think of the tattoo community, I think of bull rings and

sleeves, and stuff like that. It has to do with coverage.

Evan's narrative highlighted the importance of complicated nature of defining the tattoo community and membership requirements. Even though he had large visible tattoos on his arms, he felt as if his tattoos did not make him an eligible member since they were mostly "outlines" and not "filled-in" like the more popular "traditional" style seen around San Marcos.

It is difficult to place boundaries on the tattoo community in San Marcos, however from my observations I would define these as being more fluid than other tattoo communities, due to the ever-changing population in this town. The stricter boundaries or membership requirements I have observed here would be having larger tattoos, more coverage as in tattoos on multiple parts of the body, tattoos that have been done well, and having traditional or neotraditional tattoos. While members are not bound to a single community, these characteristics seem hold the highest value within the San Marcos tattoo community.

Symbolic Values and Community

According to Hebdige (1988), youth culture tends to focus on social and cultural aspects of identity expression such as dress in order to exhibit the limited power available to this group. Mendoza-Denton (2008) also describes the relationship between various aspects of identity and cultural style including language, fashion, and material culture and how youth may navigate these resources in order to express their identities.

As stated above, these theories may be used as lenses to understand the relationship between emerging adults and tattoos since college students and youth share similar experiences during these life stages. Both youth and emerging adults combine

symbolic elements of style into their identity practices, which can be seen through their attitude, dress, and other symbolic markers such as tattoos.

Through a qualitative analysis of my research data, I found that the majority of students that I interviewed felt empowered and unique by having tattoos. Even though 47% of the millennial generation has been reported as having at least one tattoo (Shannon-Massal 2016), my students spoke to feelings of individualism and pride, but also a sense of community through having tattoos. These feelings were amplified further through the ownership of visible tattoos, which served as a more obvious marker to other members of the tattoo community.

Throughout studies of fashion and cosmetic enhancement, it is argued that consumers have increased their desire to achieve personal uniqueness (Cano and Sams 2010; Ruvio 2008). Although emerging adults do place importance on personal uniqueness there are still observable cultural patterns represented. Currently, we can see that this desire is being filled by the practice of tattooing. In alignment with research on uniqueness, I found that the students I interviewed did place importance on visible uniqueness and mentioned that they were viewed differently by non-tattooed people for having tattoos (Gillen and Dunaev 2017; Tiggemann and Golder 2006; Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011). For Samantha, this meant that her non-tattooed dance friends thought she was cool and “artsy” based on her visual appearance alone. She said:

The more you have, the more they group you with other people. I know that people do it, because my dance friends, I have a lot of dance friends that don't have any tattoos, and they're like, “oh Samantha has all these tattoos, and she works at a coffee shop so she is THIS person and I'm like I think that I would be that person, even if I didn't. But it's because I look like this, people are like, Oh you're so artsy and I'm like, you don't know anything about me other than this (her tattoos) and the outfit I'm wearing right now. Like you don't know If I'm artsy? I am artsy, you got me, but they don't know that.

In Levi's experience, getting his arm tattoos his personal perception of himself, and how he believed other people would view him. He said:

I feel like it changed when I got arm tattoos. I feel like it honestly made me more confident in the weirdest way. Just in general. I feel like you have to kind of be more outspoken if you have arm tattoos. I feel like it [having tattoos] sets you apart. Also having visible tattoos sets you apart a lot. There's always leg tattoos but they're also super easy to hide. But having them on your forearm, below the elbow... I've gotten to the point where I can't hide them anymore. Which I'm okay with and you kind of have to have that confidence to be outspoken more.

Although Levi did have positive associations with his tattoo perceptions, his narrative is helpful in understanding the degree to which students consider how they will be viewed by others, and the influence that has on their personal thoughts of self-worth and confidence.

Regret

During my literature review, I found that there was a gap in current literature discussing tattoo regret. According to the existing literature, studies have found results with college students and adolescents expressing regret about one or more of their tattoos due to either stigma or the lack of a sufficient tattoo narrative. These studies have also found men as having more regret than women. (Dickson et al. 2014; Madfis and Arford 2013).

In terms of tattoo regret, only a few of my male participants mentioned regretting a tattoo decision, while the majority specified that they did not regret getting any of their tattoos. Out of these students, they all agreed that they did not want to get tattoo removals because they are more painful and expensive than getting a tattoo. Instead, they each said they have considered getting one or more tattoo covered up for various reasons.

In accordance with the pre-existing literature, I did find that more male students

regretted their tattoo decisions, which was not a result of a lack of planning for either gender. Rather than speaking on regret, several of the female students insisted that they did not believe they would ever regret a tattoo because it stands as a permanent reminder of a particular “season of life” that they experienced. This follows the results found by Madfis and Arford (2013, 555), where they found that “almost every tattoo will be subject to infinite interpretations and misinterpretations by people who view the image”. However, they also address the fact that tattoo meaning is subjective and are “likely to change, as are the values and desires of the individual tattoo recipient” (Madfis and Arford 2013). Aligning with these results, Samantha said:

I think that they change over time. Because it’s like, you change over time, which is cool. But I think that they all have this, not like a timestamp, but kind of. It’s like that’s who I was at this season of my life and so that’s why I wanted this because everyone always hits me with the, “in 30 years you’re gonna regret it”. And I’m like, “okay, I don’t think that I will”. And I know that everyone thinks that but also, I knew going in that in 30 years I could hate it. But when I look at it, I remember where I was, what I was doing, I remember the season of life that I was in, and why I got it and all of the feelings and things surrounding that. So, it’s like a diary, but not a diary. But then it changes too, which is cool. Also, you can cover everything up. I’m not going to get them removed. I’m not going to just stop liking tattoos one day.

In the same way, Claire said she had not experienced tattoo regret and was hopeful that she would never want to get a tattoo removal. She said:

I mean I hope I’m never at a point where I want to get mine removed, so I can’t necessarily... I mean I can try to understand why people would be like, “I hate this tattoo,” for whatever reason. I can understand why someone would feel that way, but I hope I can never relate to that. Because I don’t ever want to feel like, “I need this off my body”.

As for the male students who did share feelings of regret, Jack specifically discussed his tattoo narrative of being a resulting factor. He said:

I remember wanting tattoos since I was 15. I just thought, “I want to do this”. And really, I made up a reason for this one at the time. I’ve shifted in my thinking a bit since then but at the time I thought I had to have a good reason for it. So, I created this big deep meaning. And it wasn’t as deep as I thought it was because now I don’t even remember it. So, I just wanted it, but I did make a reason up. I remember regretting it after a while—maybe six months. But now today, I don’t regret it.

Although Jack eventually came to terms with his tattoo decision, he first had to find acceptance for his underdeveloped tattoo narrative. On the other hand, Aiden mentioned having regret about his first tattoo since it was smaller than his other pieces and because it no longer held meaning for him. He had initially designed and gotten the tattoo during a time period where he was strong in his Christian faith, but after a change in personal beliefs he decided to get it covered up. He said:

And well mostly because it’s so small compared to everything else I’ve got. It’s not a bad tattoo or like something I hate necessarily, it just doesn’t mean anything to me anymore, and it is really small, so I want something else.

Aiden’s experience also highlights the findings of Madfis and Arford (2013, 555), who argue that for some people, issues of tattoo narrative can be overcome by “understanding tattoos as markers of the past rather than indicators of stable identity”. It is important to mention that while the majority of students did not express regret about their tattoo decisions, I cannot speak to whether they will regret one or more of their tattoos in the future.

Due to the fact that you have to be 18 to get a tattoo legally, these students, ages 18-23 have only had their tattoos for a relatively short amount of their lives and could grow to regret a tattoo decision in the future. I did have two participants who were able to be tattooed before they turned 18 who did not express tattoo regret. However, it is still impossible to predict how they will feel about their tattoos later in life. The only

indication that these students may not regret their tattoos going forward is their personal narrative which showcased their philosophies about the future.

V. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

For students, college is a transitional stage where new freedoms, privileges, and experiences may be gained. My research aimed to understand how these students' experiences may be shaped by having tattoos and the decision-making processes that lead to a student getting a tattoo. Given the popularity of tattoos among young people in the U.S. and how little research has been done, tattoo practices in college students is a topic worthy of study. According to Pew Research Center (2010), almost four out of every ten millennials has a tattoo with "about half of those with tattoos have two to five and 18% have six or more". It is important to note that this research was done ten years ago and acceptance for tattoos has only grown since. According to a 2015 Harris Poll, 47% of millennials now have at least one tattoo (Shannon-Massal 2016).

I had many research goals in place for this project including the hope to identify how tattoos may help college students construct their identities, add symbolic value to their lives, navigate relationships, and the ways that students process decisions around tattoo placement and design. Through a qualitative analysis, I found many emergent themes that shed light into the current phenomenon of tattooing in college students. In the same way that a bad first impression can cause irreparable damage, a person's first tattoo experience played a role in the development of their relationship with tattooing and the tattoo community. Additionally, students spent time negotiating ideas of membership within the tattoo community with varied definitions of what requirements were essential to gain entry.

Many themes I explored were complicated and needed to be thoroughly examined in order to understand derived meaning and value. Without the personal narrative of the

students and observations made in tattoo shops, I would not have been able to unpack the complex meanings associated with many of students' tattoo decisions and associated feelings. This speaks to the importance of qualitative research in studying youth and adolescent practices as well as in social science research.

I found that displaying tattoos was an important way of exchanging social capital and gaining reciprocity among peers, and that for some students this exchange positively benefited them and their mental state. On the other hand, students were most likely to conceal their tattoos from family members for fear of disapproval and social isolation. While both male and female students concealed their tattoos from family members, women were more likely to invest time thinking about how their tattoos may be perceived by others including friends, peers, and strangers.

Problematic Implications

It is important to note that much of the existing literature on tattoo regret contains problematic implications. Presently, if a person has several tattoos and only regrets one tattoo decision, they are categorized as having tattoo regret. This ties the person to a category in which they may not identify, as they are now viewed as regretting all of their tattoo decisions. From the students I interviewed, any student who did have regret only had it about one or two of their tattoos in total. For Aiden, he regretted his first, very small tattoo, out of his 16+ tattoos. Other students shared similar unproportionate ratios. The existing literature on tattoo regret does not discuss the importance of these ratios, which may infer that adolescents as well as millennials have inaccurate levels of regret about their tattoo decisions. This finding is also meaningful as it emphasizes the importance of personal narrative in interpreting data and understanding complex

meaning.

Future Research

During my initial interviews, I did not perceive any distinct gender differences. However, during coding and analyzing my data, one did emerge as important and meaningful. Current research involving gender differences in tattooing is limited, therefore future research should be done in order to understand these distinctions. In terms of tattoo community, it can be difficult to articulate the boundaries and requirements which define a particular community. In order to understand these boundaries, I believe further research is needed.

Additionally, I found inconsistencies in narrative regarding how students tend to display or conceal tattoos through social media sites. As technology changes and social media continues to develop, future research should place an emphasis on understanding these patterns. Finally, in terms of tattoo regret, I believe the only way to fully understand the lasting implications of being tattooed would be to do a longitudinal study. The goal here would be to understand if current emerging adults will regret their tattoo decisions later in life. To do this, researchers could recruit and follow a group of current millennials, who are also emerging adults, throughout their lives to see if they develop tattoo regret as they experience different life stages.

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