



Tattoos, gender, and well-being among American college students

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ABSTRACT

This research note examines the relationship between survey respondents' reports of escalating numbers of tattoos and their measured levels of self-esteem, depression, suicide ideation, and reports of one or more suicide attempts. Data were gathered from 2,395 college students attending six American public universities. Results indicate a four-fold higher level of reported suicide attempts among females with four or more tattoos as compared to those with no tattoos, or three or less. Paradoxically, results also indicate a statistically significant elevation in self-esteem within that same group. No other findings and comparisons are statistically significant. These findings are interpreted in light of previous research examining the relationship between tattoos and gender, body image, and deviance.

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1. Introduction

The social and behavioral correlates for individuals with tattoos are varied, paradoxical, and multi-faceted. This current body of research examines, among other things, the relationship between tattoo acquisition and interest with the type of wearer, quantity of tattoos, need for uniqueness, gender differences, as well as sexual activity, and religion. There is seemingly clear evidence that body art acquisition correlates with social deviance (Burger & Finkel, 2002; Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999; King & Vidourek, 2013). However, visible tattoos are readily observed throughout popular culture among athletes, entertainers, corporate world members, and college student populations (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; Drews, Allison, & Probst, 2000; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2005; Kosut, 2006). These mixed findings relate also to the

shifting meaning of tattoos over time. Madfis and Arford (2013) report that as tattoos become more prevalent and visible in mainstream culture, there seems to be an emerging backlash of tattoo regret as wearers see themselves – and their tattoos – differently over time. Armstrong et al. (2008) reported tattoo regret was significantly more prevalent among women. Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko (2013) report two emotional dynamics in play for tattoo wearers over time. Their respondents report both a greater level of stigma/stigmatization, as well as increased commitment to body modification.

These paradoxical findings relate also to the quantity of tattoos. Recently, Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen (2010) noted that only individuals with four or more tattoos – as compared to those with none, one, or two/three – were substantively and statistically more likely to engage in heavy drinking, use illegal drugs, have multiple sex partners, or report a significant arrest history. Short of that, however, it seems perhaps a single rose or zodiac sign is no more edgy today than the Beatle haircut in the early 60s. Tate and Shelton (2008) rather forthrightly suggest college

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students with tattoos and piercings are “all right.” While they do note a statistically significant decrease in conscientiousness and agreeableness among tattooed versus non-tattooed respondents, they conclude that these very small variations likely have no real-world consequence.

The question of emotional motivation also underlies differences (or lack thereof) in behavioral correlates of tattoo interest and procurement. Research suggests tattooed individuals are more likely to be risk-takers, while expressing, and possessing a higher need for uniqueness (Kertzman, Kagan, Vainder, Lapidus, & Wiezman, 2013; Owen, Armstrong, Koch, & Roberts, 2013; Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011). Even gender differences are evident with tattoo acquisition. Far from the stereotypical tattooed military and “biker” male, the Harris poll (Braveman, 2012) now reports women are more likely to have a tattoo than men (23% vs. 19%, respectively). Again however, a paradox emerges; women are also more likely to seek tattoo removal (Armstrong et al., 2008).

Further complicating these correlations is research interpreting body art acquisition and behavior in light of more general analyses of socio-emotions. For example, Koch et al. (2005) reported that tattooed respondents were more likely to be sexually active, and to have begun a sexual history at an earlier age than those without tattoos. This distinction carries emotional import. Early-onset sexual activity has been reported to correlate with depressive symptoms, and inversely correlate with high self-esteem (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Rudolf, 2004).

Other studies also report positive correlations between respondents' histories of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and the procurement of body art (Lui & Lester, 2012; Romans, Martin, Morris, & Harrison, 1998). And, while those with genital piercings have often reported significant abuse and forced sexual activity against their will, they also report the use of these piercings to help them “take control of (or reclaim) their body after these violations.” (Neliu et al., 2011, p. 1001; Young, Armstrong, Roberts, Mello, & Angel, 2010). Finally, histories of abuse or neglect also tend to predict suicidal ideation, self-injury, and a history of suicide attempts (Andover, Zlotnick, & Miller, 2007). Moreover, these connections appear to be stronger for females (Armstrong, Caliendo, & Roberts, 2006; Roy & Janal, 2006).

This research note examines the emotional motivations and outcomes that accompany escalating acquisitions of tattoos. We report results from surveying college students; we present regression models, correlations and analyses relating gender and number of tattoos with measures of self-esteem, depression, suicide ideation, and suicidal behavior. We address the meaning of these findings and offer an agenda for future research.

2. Methods and results

2.1. The sample

Data were gathered from six purposive samples of college students studying at six American public universities. Students were located in the following regions of the United States and identified by pseudonym: Northeast State, $n = 658$; Southeast State, $n = 328$; Midwest State,

$n = 476$; Midsouth State, $n = 557$; Northwest State, $n = 190$; Southwest State, $n = 185$.

Respondents were recruited from undergraduate sociology classes. Following IRB approval at every location, and obtaining informed consent, 2,394 students chose to respond out of a possible class enrollment of 3,235; our response rate was seventy-four percent. Eighty-two percent of respondents were ages 18–20; sixty-seven percent were Anglo; fifty-nine percent were female.

2.2. Variables and scales

We measured “Well-being” three ways. Scales were developed from examples in existing literature. They are: Self Esteem – ten items, Cronbach's Alpha = .86 (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991); Depression – six items, Cronbach's Alpha = .88 (Radloff, 1977); Suicide Ideation—two items, Cronbach's Alpha = .80 (Radloff, 1977). The final dependent variable recorded the number of times respondents reported having attempted suicide. Specific items and response choices are reported below, in Appendix.

Two independent variables were used in the analysis. These are: Gender—male or female, and Number of Tattoos (None, 1, 2–3, 4+).

2.3. Results

Table 1 reports results from four OLS multiple regression analyses. Each dependent variable – self-esteem, depression, suicide ideation, as well as the reported number of suicide attempts – is regressed on gender and number of tattoos. In addition, when, for example, number of suicide attempts is regressed on gender and number of tattoos, the other three measures of well-being (in this case depression, self-esteem, and suicide ideation) are included for comparative purposes in the model as independent variables. This pattern follows throughout.

Substantive findings are as follows:

1. Gender (female = 1) is positively related to reports of at least one suicide attempt, negatively related to self-esteem, positively related to depression, and, paradoxically, negatively related to suicide ideation. All of the reported coefficients are statistically significant, and they are substantively important in that they hold with the presence of the other well-being variables in the model.
2. Number of tattoos has no association with suicide ideation, yet is positively related to reports of at least one suicide attempt as well as with depression. Paradoxically, number of tattoos is also positively related to self-esteem. These positive relationships are statistically significant, and they are substantively important in that they hold with the presence of the other well-being variables in the model.
3. Relationships among the well-being variables are as expected. Suicide attempts are positively related to depression and suicide ideation; self-esteem is negatively related to suicide attempts (n.s.), depression, and suicide ideation; depression is positive for suicide attempt and suicide ideation and negative for

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