



## More similar than different: Tattooed adults are only slightly more impulsive and willing to take risks than Non-tattooed adults



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### ABSTRACT

Emerging evidence suggests that there are few differences in the personality profiles of tattooed and non-tattooed adults. To add to this literature, we compared tattooed and non-tattooed adults in terms of their willingness to take risks in multiple domains, as well as their impulsivity and boredom proneness. Adults from central Europe ( $N = 1006$ ) completed measures of the afore-mentioned concepts and reported the number of tattoos they had. In total, 19.1% of respondents had at least one tattoo, with no significant differences as a function of sex, nationality, education, or marital status. We also found that tattooed adults had higher motor impulsivity and were more willing to take risks in recreational and health and safety domains. However, effect sizes of these differences were negligible to small. Among tattooed adults, there were no significant associations between the number of tattoos possessed and any of the measured variables. These results suggest that tattooed and non-tattooed adults nowadays are more similar than different.

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### 1. Introduction

Although once the domain of out-groups, such as prisoners and gang-members, tattooing has gone mainstream in the last two decades (Swami & Harris, 2012). Surveys in North America, Europe, and Australia suggest that up to a quarter of the population in these countries now has at least one tattoo (e.g., Heywood et al., 2012; Laumann & Derick, 2006; Stieger, Pietschnig, Kastner, Voracek, & Swami, 2010). Explanations for the growing popularity of tattoos have focused on the assimilation of body art into consumer culture, allowing tattoos to transcend earlier socioeconomic and demographic boundaries (Kosut, 2006). In tandem with this, some scholars view tattoos as a means of reclaiming agency over the body (Benson, 2000) or of achieving and accentuating uniqueness in the appearance domain (Swami, 2011; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006; Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011), particularly in post-industrial societies where the body is commodified and objectified. The accessibility of tattoo removal may also stimulate tattoo procurement as individuals no longer associate them with permanency (Armstrong, Tustin, Owen, Koch, & Roberts, 2013).

In line with the mainstreaming of tattoos, empirical research has focused on behavioural risks associated with tattooing (see Swami & Harris, 2012). Among adolescents, tattooing has been consistently

associated with drug and alcohol use (e.g., Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, & Myhre, 2002; Deschesnes, Fines, & Demers, 2006; Roberts & Ryan, 2002; Silver, VanEseltine, & Silver, 2009), increased sexual activity (Carroll et al., 2002; Oliveira, Matos, Martins, & Teles, 2006; Roberts & Ryan, 2002), and illegal and violent behaviour (Deschesnes et al., 2006; Roberts & Ryan, 2002). Likewise, tattoo possession among college students is associated with increased, earlier, and riskier sexual activity (Burger & Finkel, 2002; Drews, Allison, & Probst, 2000; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2005, 2010), the use of illegal substances (Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006), and a history of criminal arrest (Koch et al., 2010). Among adult, community samples, too, tattooing is associated with risky behaviours, including smoking, greater number of lifetime sexual partners, and drug use (Heywood et al., 2012; Laumann & Derick, 2006; but see Adams, 2009).

These associations have been used to bolster calls for clinicians to use tattooing as an indicator for further investigation into risk-taking behaviours, at least among adolescents (Stephens, 2003). However, explanations for these associations are not fully developed. One possibility is that individuals who get tattooed have particular personality constellations that mean they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours compared to non-tattooed individuals. While early studies did find that tattooed individuals scored higher than non-tattooed individuals on dimensions such as extraversion and sensation-seeking (e.g., Drews et al., 2000; Roberti, Storch, & Bravata, 2004), more recent work suggests that any such differences may have

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levelled off to the point where they are now very small or negligible (Swami, 2012; Swami et al., 2015; Swami et al., 2012).

Indeed, Tate and Shelton (2008, p. 281) conclude that uncovered differences likely reflect “inconsequential real world differences” between those with and without tattoos. Likewise, differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals on dimensions of mental ill-health, such as rates of depression and low self-esteem, appear to be small or non-existent (Fredrick & Bradley, 2000; Swami et al., 2012), which discounts this as a route toward risk-taking behaviours. In short, the emerging picture is one of similarity rather than difference in personality characteristics between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals, which can be ascribed to the mainstreaming and greater societal acceptance of body art (Swami et al., 2012).

An alternative explanation for the uncovered differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals is based on scholarship related to risk attitude, or the way in which people perceive and resolve decisions involving risk and uncertainty (Blais & Weber, 2006). Any decision to engage in a risky behaviour involves an evaluation of the benefits and risks, as well as the trade-off between perceived benefits and perceived risks (Weber & Hsee, 1998). However, individuals differ in their specific willingness to trade off potential returns for units of risk (i.e., their risk attitude; Weber & Hsee, 1998), which affects decision-making within particular domains (Weber, 2001). Among the decision domains in which individual differences in risk attitude have been found are gambling, business decisions, and personal decisions that include health and safety decisions (Blais & Weber, 2006).

In short, some individuals may be more willing than others to take risks in particular domains and this may help to explain associations between tattooing and risk-taking behaviours. For example, it is possible that tattooed individuals are more willing to engage in risky activities or behaviours in personal, but not other domains. If this is the case, it may be reflective of between-group differences in the way tattooed and non-tattooed individuals evaluate and perceive risk in that particular domain. In this study, therefore, we examined differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals in their willingness to engage in risky activities and behaviours in multiple domains. We also examined whether the quantity of tattoos an individual possessed would be associated with their willingness to engage in risky behaviours in multiple domains.

Besides risk attitudes, another potential explanation for differences in risk-taking behaviour focuses on impulsivity, which refers to a predisposition toward unplanned reactions without consideration of consequences (Moeller, Barratt, Dougherty, Schmitz, & Swann, 2001). The trait has been associated with risky decision-making and self-reported high-risk attitudes (Courtney et al., 2012), which makes it an important candidate for examination in relation to tattooing. In fact, one previous study of North American college students found differences in global impulsivity between tattooed and non-tattooed women, but not men (Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). However, the sample sizes in the study were small and, combined with the limitations of a college sample, associations between tattooing and impulsivity require further attention.

Related to impulsivity is the concept of boredom proneness, which refers to individual differences in the propensity to get bored. Like impulsivity, boredom proneness has also been associated with risky behaviours, including pathological gambling (Blaszczynsky, McConaghy, & Frankova, 1990) and unsafe driving (Dahlen, Martin, Ragan, & Kuhlman, 2005). Although impulsivity and boredom proneness are conceptually related (Watt & Vodanovich, 1992), it is also possible that these factors have independent effects on risk-taking behaviour. Moreover, there does not appear to have been any prior research examining associations between boredom proneness and tattooing. We rectified this omission in the present work.

To summarise, we compared differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals in their willingness to take risks in multiple domains, their impulsivity, and their boredom proneness. Based on the available evidence, we predicted that tattooed individuals would be

more willing to take personal risks compared to non-tattooed individuals. We also predicted that tattooed individuals would have higher levels of impulsivity and boredom proneness compared to non-tattooed individuals. Finally, we also examined associations between the quantity of tattoos an individual possessed and their willingness to take risks, impulsivity, and boredom proneness, with the expectation of positive relationships on all counts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 551 women and 455 men from the community in the southern German-speaking region of central Europe. The majority of participants were Austrian (52.5%), whereas 39.5% were German, and 8.0% were of some other nationality. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 76 years ( $M = 29.98$ ,  $SD = 12.84$ ). In terms of marital status, 31.2% were single, 47.7% were cohabiting, 15.6% were married, and the remainder were of some other status.

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. Tattoos

Following Stieger et al. (2010), participants were asked to indicate whether or not they were tattooed. If a participant reported being tattooed, they were asked to indicate the number of tattoos on the following locations: back, stomach, buttocks, chest, upper arm, forearm, thigh, lower leg, and other locations. A total score was calculated as the sum of tattoos on all body parts.

#### 2.2.2. Risk-taking

To measure participants' willingness to engage in risk-taking behaviours, we used the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking (Adult) Scale (DoSpERT; Blais & Weber, 2006). The risk-taking version of this scale consists of 30 items that evaluate an individual's likelihood of engaging in risky attitudes or behaviours in five domains of life, namely ethical, financial, health and safety, social, and recreational risks (with each domain consisting of 6 items). All items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*Extremely likely*). Subscale scores were computed as the mean of items associated with each domain, with higher scores reflecting greater willingness for risk-taking in that domain. Blais and Weber (2006) reported that the DoSpERT subscales had adequate reliability and provided evidence for the factorial, convergent, and discriminant validity of subscale scores. In the present study, internal consistency coefficients for all subscales ranged between .70 and .79.

#### 2.2.3. Impulsivity

Participants completed version 11 of the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11; Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995; German translation: Preuss et al., 2008), a 30-item measure of the trait of impulsivity. The BIS-11 consists of three subscales, namely Attentional Impulsiveness (assesses task-focus, intrusive thoughts, and racing thoughts; 8 items), Motor Impulsiveness (the tendency to act on the spur of the moment and consistent of lifestyle; 11 items), and Non-Planning Impulsiveness (assesses careful thinking and planning, and enjoyment of challenging mental tasks; 11 items). All items were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Rarely/Never*) to 4 (*Almost always/Always*). Several items were reverse-coded prior to analysis and subscale scores were computed as the mean of items associated with each factor. The German version of the BIS-11 has adequate internal consistency coefficients and good psychometric properties (Hartmann, Rief, & Hilbert, 2011; Preuss et al., 2008). In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for all three subscales ranged between .72 and .78.

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