

**Tattoos:  
A Marked History**

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## Research Proposal

I did not know anyone who had a tattoo in high school. Then when I came to college one of my roommates got a tattoo within the first weeks of school. I started dating a guy who had a tattoo. And from the exposure of just those two people, tattoos started popping out at me; I began noticing that tattoos were embedded in the skin of more and more people around campus. I had always been opposed to tattoos – an opinion I had adopted from my parents. But with the infiltration of tattoos into my life – through the people I chose to surround myself with and through the people I shared my college campus with – I was forced to reevaluate my opinion. Are tattoos really as bad as my parents made them out to be?

I chose tattoos as my topic for what became several different projects over the course of my college career. Each time I explored the topic new questions arose that propelled me to investigate a new dimension of tattoos. And each time, my investigation grew both in breadth and depth. I have yet to satisfy my curiosity. Therefore my senior project will investigate the latest dimension of interest to me and summarize my previous findings in hopes of finding a thorough answer to my original question.

Specifically my senior project will focus on society's changing perception of tattoos over time. At its introduction to Western culture, tattoos were reserved to the elite and thought to be symbols of the bearer's worldliness. This perception changed with the advancement of technology – which made tattoos available to a wider range of social classes – and tattoos' association with marginalized, subcultural groups. Today trends have once again changed. Tattoos are arguably the most popular they have ever been. My senior project will examine the factors behind this resurgence of popularity and seek to explain why, despite the outwardly apparent acceptance of tattoos as a legitimate fashion statement, society as an institution still stigmatizes tattoos.

My discussion of tattoos is not intended to portray tattooing as either an acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Nor will I ever attempt to persuade readers to adopt any opinions I may have regarding tattoos. In fact, the purpose of my senior project is to make students aware of the effect external influences have on people's opinions. The exaggerations of the media, the findings of both methodologically flawed and sound case studies, and the association of tattoos with both celebrities and deviant groups have all influenced society's perceptions of tattoos as either acceptable behavior or unacceptable behavior (depending on the prevailing influence at the time). I hope my senior project encourages students to approach widely-accepted perceptions with skepticism, to conduct their own investigations when perceptions appear to be based on invalid or unreliable information, and in general, to form opinions on their own accord – free of any external influences other than the substantiated facts.

## Annotated Bibliography

Adams, Josh. "Marked Difference: Tattooing and its Association with Deviance in the United States."

*Deviant Behavior*. 30.3 (2009): 266 – 292. *Sociological Abstracts*. Gale Group. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 31 Aug. 2009. <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

Adams approaches his investigation on the association of tattooing and deviance by first stating that deviance is "temporally and spatially contextual." With that statement he gives an overview of the association between tattooing and deviance starting with the work of criminologist Lombroso. Lombroso claimed that criminality "could be discerned through the observation of physical traits," (p. 269). One such trait, having "little sensitivity to pain" explained why criminals had a higher tendency to be tattooed (p. 270). The association between tattooing and deviance remained even after Lombroso's claims were disproved. Despite this and other examples of the stigmatization of tattooing, Adams believes that today tattooing has broken free from its previous negative stigma as evident by the wide social spectrum of tattooed individuals. He attempts to prove the disassociation between tattooing and deviance through quantitative analysis. Unlike qualitative studies that focus on perceived acceptability, Adams' analysis examines social characteristics of tattooed individuals to determine the status of tattooing as a practice. He makes eleven hypotheses – which include characteristics such as gender, educational attainment, drug use, religious affiliation and having friends or family members with tattoos – that predict the likelihood of an individual to have a tattoo. Though his findings prove some of his hypotheses correct, overall, the results conclude that tattooing is still associated with marginality and deviance.

Atkinson, Michael. "Tattooing and Civilizing Processes: Body Modification as Self-Control. *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology*. 41.2 (2004): 125-146. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 16 May 2009. <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.

In an attempt to provide an alternative to tattooing's long-standing stigma, Atkinson both provides an understanding of tattooing's stigma, perceived as "a pathological instance of self-injury," and details a new wave of perception, making the claim of tattooing as a "pro-social act of communication," (Abstract). Thus this source proves useful in arguing the duality of society's perception of tattooing. To support his argument that tattooing is rational and pro-social, Atkinson draws from interviews he conducted himself of Canadian tattoo artists and tattoo enthusiasts. Atkinson claims that tattooing is a physical expression of individuality. In addition to demonstrating the duality of society's perception, Atkinson also highlights the duality of tattoos' significance. Tattooing's duality mimics the duality of its perception. Tattoos can be both symbols of exclusion and of inclusion. Atkinson argues that tattoos separate the individual from society by providing him/her a unique identity and at the same time unites the individual with a subculture through shared values.

DeMello, Margo. Bodies of Inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

This book correlates perfectly with the intent of my paper. It provides the cultural and anthropological component that is key in investigating how society's perception of tattoos has changed over time. This source provides a historical timeline of tattooing in America from the first tattoo parlor in New York in 1846 to the popularity of tattoos today. She describes

Americans' varying receptiveness of tattooing at each significant event in tattooing's American history – such as when circuses and freak shows were popular or before and after the World Wars. An example of the connection DeMello makes between historical events and the status of tattoos at the time of those events is the zoot suit riots of the forties. The riots brought negative media attention to the tattooed pachuco culture. According to DeMello, the event along with the emergence of tattooed outlaw bikers as a subcultural group, also in the forties, “solidified postwar society's negative views of tattooing,” (p. 67). DeMello also emphasizes the significance of class within tattooing's historical timeline. For example, when Samuel O'Reilly invented the first electric tattoo machine in 1891, the type of people getting tattoos shifted from the upper class to the lower class. The machine made tattooing less painful, cheaper and faster to administer - thus making tattooing available and more appealing to the lower class.

Gay, Kathlyn and Christine Whittington. Body Marks: tattooing, piercing, and scarification. Brookfield: Twenty-First Century Books, 2002.

The unique layout of this book makes it seem more of an encyclopedia than simply a literary source. It provides concise information on an array of topics concerning tattoos. It gives a brief background on the history of tattooing, highlighting the evidence of its existence in prehistoric cultures. Gay and Whittington discuss tattooing practices of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans; and highlight the possibility that these practices may have served medical purposes. Paralleling the description of cultural practices, this source describes differing perceptions of tattoos including religious views, social views during the circus and freak show years, and social views today. This source also provides descriptions of different types of tattoos such as gang tattoos, 'traditional' tattoos or tattoos that draw from Japanese culture. I am most excited

about the sections that discuss the possible medical consequences of tattooing and various laws restricting tattoos. The military especially has restrictions on content and quantity of tattoos on its personnel.

Kosut, Mary. "An Ironic Fad: the commodification and consumption of tattoos. *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 39.6 (2006): 1035-1048. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 30 May 2009. <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.

Kosut discusses tattoos' transition from fringe to mainstream. She focuses on the influence of the media on tattoo's popularity within society. Tattoos are present in the movies; on actors, musicians, and athletes; and even within the children's toy market. An example Kosut gives of the impact media coverage has on society's perception of tattoos is the 2002 blockbuster movie XXX. In XXX actor Vin Diesel's character, a socially-detached thrill-seeker, has a heavily tattooed torso and neck. Even though the character fits what could be considered a tattooed stereotype Kosut argues that rather than reinforcing that stereotype, the character elevates tattoos in the eyes of society. The 'cool' appeal of the hero make teenage audiences think tattoos also are cool. Other examples of the proliferation of tattoos in the media include a tattoo-able Barbie and a VISA commercial that notes the capability of using the credit card at a local tattoo parlor. With these examples and others, Kosut argues that the youth of this generation are growing up in an increasingly tattoo-friendly environment.



Kosut, Mary. "Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories." *Deviant Behavior*. 27.1 (2006): 73-95. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 16 May 2009. <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.

In this article Kosut discusses society's perception of tattoos overtime. She states that "academics" have in decades past labeled tattooing as deviant behavior and indications of pathological behavior as well. However, she notes that in recent years this perception may be changing. Tattoos can be seen to have more meaning, specifically as a unique cultural form. A particular quote from this article that stood out to me was one in which Kosut contrasted the evolving acceptance of tattooing to the jazz movement. She claims that unlike other "aesthetic-cultural forms" like jazz, tattooing has failed to make the transition from "marginality to mainstream legitimacy" because of "a long-established and powerful public aversion to the practice," (p. 90). This underlying public aversion seems to thwart any progress of tolerance by younger generations.

Langman, Lauren. "Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization of the Body in Popular Culture." *Current Sociology*. 56.4 (2008): 657-677. *PsycINFO*. EBSCOhost. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 16 May 2009. <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.

This source serves as a link between the labeling of tattooing as deviant behavior and the application of the concept of alienation to an individual's decision to get tattooed. Langman provides an explanation – a possible motive – for the recent tattooing phenomena. She claims that an increasingly impersonal society has driven individuals into a reversion towards carnival-like behavior. In medieval societies carnivals served as an environment where repressed peasants could unleash their creativity, participate in cultural rituals, ridicule the ruling elite and

engage in promiscuous behavior. Langman associates tattooing with modern-day carnivalization. Additionally she argues that tattooing is also an act of rebellion against the ideal body type. Tattoos thence become fashion statements, a method by which an individual can reclaim control of his/her body, and symbols of “inclusion in alternative identity-granting communities,” (p. 664).

Polhemus, Ted. Hot Bodies, Cool Styles: new techniques in self-adornment. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

Despite society’s habit of normalizing them, Pohlemus examines hairstyles and make-up as body adornments among other appearance-altering techniques such as tattooing and piercing. Of most relevance for this project is his insight on tattooing. However, Pohlemus’ decision to be broad in his examination allows for unique observations I have not seen in other writings on the topic. From the start of his book Pohlemus argues that humans have an innate desire to beautify their bodies. He contrasts humans against such animals as zebras, parrots and tropical fish – all of which have unique patterns or colorings. Humans, according to Pohlemus, were cursed with blandness. Yet he also argues that this same curse is a hidden blessing. Human skin becomes a perfect medium for adornment – a blank canvas. Pohlemus continues his discussion on tattooing by focusing on humans’ long history of fascination with the technique and on the sociological motives and sociological significance surrounding tattooing.

Ritzer, George. Sociological Theory. 7th ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2008.

I will be using this textbook as a reference to the sociological theories applicable to my paper. In particular, I will use Georg Simmel's theory on fashion to explain the duality of tattooing evident by its association with both marginality and popularity. Simmel claims that fashion "allows those who wish to conform to the demands of the group to do so" and "those who wish to be individualistic [to] deviate," (p. 162). If tattoos can be considered a form of fashion, Simmel's theory can explain how conflicting perceptions of tattooing can exist simultaneously. I will also attempt to use Karl Marx's theory of alienation to provide an explanation of factors motivating an individual to get tattooed. In his theory of alienation, Marx claims that an alienated individual "does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind," (p. 54). Tattooing can be viewed as one such mortification of the body. Also because alienated individuals no longer find self-worth through their jobs, tattooing can be seen as a creative outlet used to establish a sense of identity.

Wohlrab, Silke., et al. "Differences in Personality Attributions Toward Tattooed and Non-tattooed Virtual Human Characters." *Journal of Individual Differences*. 30.1 (2009): 1-5. *PsycINFO*. EBSCOhost. Cal Poly State University Lib., San Luis Obispo, CA. 26 May 2009. <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.

This article reports the findings of a study conducted in Germany at the University of Göttingen testing the general perception of tattooed individuals. The findings concluded that despite increasing popularity of tattoos, a negative perception of tattoos still remained. Participants in the study were either given an image of a man and woman both tattooed or an image of a man and woman both not tattooed. The participants were then asked to rate the man and woman on

a range of personality attributes. Results showed that participants believed the tattooed man and woman were more likely to seek thrill and adventure, to be susceptible to boredom, to have had a greater number of sexual partners, and were less likely to be inhibited compared to the non-tattooed man and woman.

## Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. Tattoos through History
  - A. Origins of Tattooing
    - 1. European discovery of tattooing
    - 2. Perceptions shaped by tattoos function in society
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      - b. North Americans
      - c. Greeks and the story of Olive Oatman
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    - 2. Popularity among the aristocracy
  - C. Tattoos in America
    - 1. Invention of the electric tattoo machine
    - 2. Association with the armed forces and patriotism
  - D. The Circus
    - 1. Display of tattooed Westerners
    - 2. Story of Horace Ridler
  - E. Negativity in the Forties and Fifties
    - 1. Unsanitary conditions
    - 2. Socio-biological perspectives

3. Links to marginalized groups

- a. Motorcycle gangs
- b. Pachuco culture

F. Tattoo Renaissance

- 1. Influence of Japanese tattooing
- 2. Adoption of tattooing by counter-culture revolutionists

III. Tattoos Today

A. Tattoos in the Media

- 1. Reframing of tattoos by media sources
- 2. Tattooed movie characters
- 3. Tattooed celebrities

B. Commodification of Tattoos

- 1. Tattoos in children's toys
- 2. Use of tattoos in advertisement

C. Tattoos and Body Image

- 1. Conforming to body ideals through body modification
- 2. Rejection of body ideals

D. Modern Perceptions of Tattoos

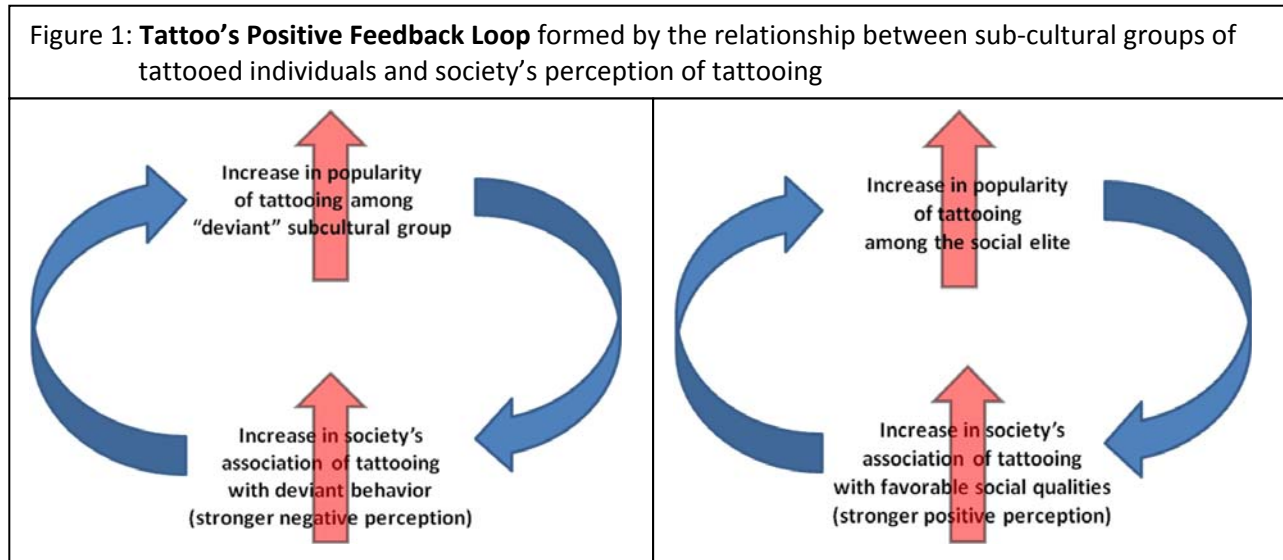
E. Conclusion

## Introduction

Society's perception of tattooing has fluctuated over the years since tattooing was first executed in the United States. At its inception tattooing was primarily reserved to the upper class. Tattoos became symbols of high status and indicated the bearer's worldliness or appreciation of "culture." Tattoos were also popular among servicemen, who used tattoos as badges of honor, indicators of patriotism, or documentation of their travels. Later, however, technical advancements made tattooing less expensive and tattoos became the fashion of the lower classes. With this shift, society's perception of tattoos also shifted. Tattooing was seen as savage-like, immoral, or unclean. Around the same time, tattoos entered the carnival scene. Tattooed individuals were displayed at freak shows and side shows as objects at which audiences gawked. Much later, in the 1950s and 60s, tattoos were linked to such marginalized groups as "bikers" (motorcyclists) and gangbangers (Adams "Marked Difference" 285). Today trends seem to have shifted again. Rather than being associated with a particular group, however, today the types of people getting tattoos are constantly diversifying. Tattoos can be found marking the skin of college students, soccer moms, and businessmen alike.

The changes in society's perception of tattoos can be explained by the shifting popularity of tattoos from one social subgroup to another. The particular social subgroup engaging in tattooing at a given time period has influenced whether society held a favorable view or unfavorable view of tattoos during that same time period. For example, when tattoos were popular among elitist subgroups, society perceived tattooing as an acceptable social practice. In addition, the prevailing opinion of tattoos within society has influenced tattoo's popularity among subgroups. For example, an unfavorable attitude toward tattoos encouraged individuals associated with a deviant subgroup to acquire tattoos. Therefore, tattoo's popularity among a particular subgroup and society's perception of tattoos form a positive feedback loop. The particular social subgroup engaging in tattooing affects how society perceives the

practice. Society’s perception of tattooing, in turn, increases the amount of individuals belonging to that particular social subgroup to acquire tattoos, which reinforces society’s perception of tattooing (See Figure 1).



The type of people getting tattoos has varied over time and from culture to culture. During one time period tattoos were popular among the higher class and in a subsequent time period tattoos were popular among a marginalized group. In one culture tattoos symbolize honor and prestige whereas in another culture tattoos are the mark of slaves. By examining the trends in tattoo popularity in certain social groups over time, this research paper seeks to analyze the corresponding trends in society’s perception of tattoos. In addition to popularity trends, other factors influencing society’s perception of tattoos will be explored. Finally, this research project will investigate the general perception of tattoos today and explain this perception in a sociological context.

## ***Tattoos Through History***

### **Origins of Tattooing**

Tattooing’s prehistoric origins have had an affect on how the practice was perceived for ages proceeding its “discovery” by European explorers. Europeans generally viewed tattooing as a practice



executed by “primitive”<sup>1</sup> people. Naturally, the cultural practices of civilizations classified as “primitive” have also been viewed as primitive. It is in this context that tattoos have often been classified. Records reflecting society’s attitude towards tattoos are minimal during the age of exploration, however, it is easy to understand why society at the time might view tattooing as crude or barbaric. Assuming that most Europeans belonged to one of the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, or Islam), Europeans probably revered the body as holy or precious. These faiths hold that God created the human body in His own image; therefore, any unnatural marks on the body would be seen as defacing God’s creation. Some of the civilizations that practiced tattooing also practiced human sacrifice. Europeans viewed human sacrifice not only as immoral but also grotesque. Inscribing ink into the flesh and cutting out a human heart to sacrifice to the gods (as practiced among the Aztecs) may have been perceived as equivalent in the minds of Europeans. Thus, tattooing was viewed as a grotesque and morally repugnant practice.

Not all Europeans, felt repulsed or offended by the practice upon discovering it. In fact, the most famous tattoo discoverer, Joseph banks, had an opposite initial reaction. He was intrigued. Joseph Banks worked under the command of British Captain (then Lieutenant) James Cook as naturalist aboard the

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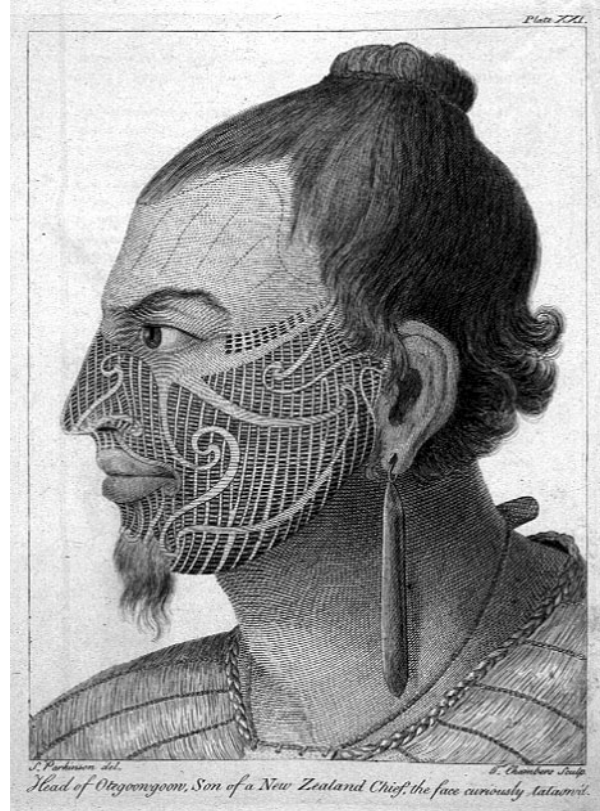
<sup>1</sup> Primitive is a term used by early European anthropologist in describing non-Western civilizations, typically those that came into contact with European explorers. The term refers to a civilization’s lack of social or economic development, but often the term was applied to the members of a civilization as well. When applied to people, the term takes on a negative connotation. Primitive describes an individual as being “unsophisticated,” “simple” (as in simple-minded) or “crude” (“Primitive”). Many European explorers viewed the civilizations they encountered as inferior. This view was primarily influenced by religion. Non-Western civilizations practiced animism (belief that natural objects have spirits) or other pagan religions whereas most European explorers were Christian and in some cases may have been allowed to explore under the guise of evangelism. Modern anthropologists criticize early anthropologists for using the term not only because it is derogatory, but also because it is invalid. Some non-Western civilizations – particularly the Aztec and Incan civilizations – were extremely complex. The social and economic development of these civilizations rivaled those of European civilizations.

*Endeavour* during its first voyage to the Pacific between 1768 and 1771. Though his journal entries are mostly descriptive, Banks does provide insight into his opinions regarding the tattooing he observed. In

Figure 2



Figure 3



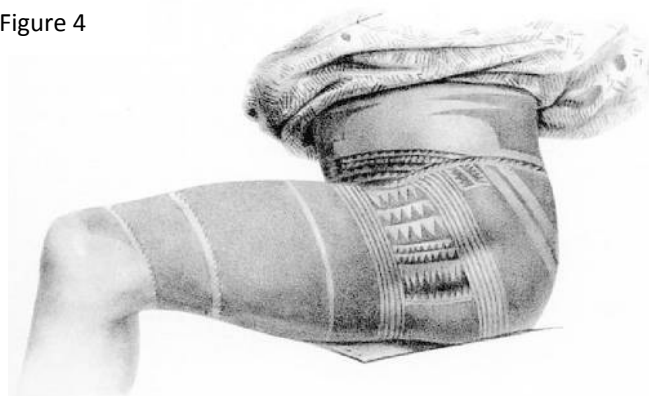
A New Zealand chief (Figure 2) and warrior (Figure 3), engraved after drawings by Sydney Parkinson, 1770

*The Endeavour: Journal of Joseph Banks* he expresses his curiosity when he writes, "What can be a sufficient inducement to suffer so much pain is difficult to say; not one Indian (though I asked hundreds) would ever give me the least reason for it" (qtd. in Gilbert 37). Banks shows genuine interest in the motives behind tattooing. His confusion in trying to understand the practice is merely based on the fact that tattooing was a practice completely new to him. Tattooing did not exist in his idea of culture. His tone, apparent even in just this one sentence, indicates that his inquiry is not driven by abhorrence but by genuine curiosity and desire for understanding. Banks does not seek an explanation in order to prove that tattooing is a detestable practice or to use the information for any other reason than knowledge acquisition. Banks continues by speculating, "possibly superstition may have something to do with it,

nothing else in my opinion could be a sufficient cause for so apparently absurd a custom” (qtd. in Gilbert 37). Banks admits that he thinks tattooing is absurd. Even in his admittance, however, Banks does not pass judgment on the practice. The perception of a custom being absurd is not inherently a negative perception. “Absurd” means “illogical” or “contrary to all reason or common sense” (“Absurd”). The practice of tattooing is “absurd” to Banks because he could not comprehend the motives or purposes. His comprehension was limited to his knowledge and his concepts of culture. By remembering that Banks’ encounter with Pacific Islanders (in the quote referred to as ‘Indians’) was a collision of extremely contrasting cultures, “absurd” can be understood not as a label indicating pointlessness, but as a label acknowledging the comprehension gap that exists between two differing cultures. Banks does not choose to label tattooing as either a socially acceptable or socially unacceptable behavior. This decision, regardless if it was made consciously, indicates the respect Banks had for the cultures he observed.

The perception of tattooing within the prehistoric societies that practiced the art is evident in the functions tattooing played in their culture. For many societies tattooing played an integral role in socialization, religion, and warfare. In both the ancient Tongan and the ancient Samoan societies of Polynesia, tattoo artist was a highly privileged position. For the Tongans, priests – well trained and following strict rituals – executed the tattooing (Gilbert 22). The idea of current priests administering tattoos as a part of a religious ritual would likely be controversial. The fact that in the Tongan society priests were the ones to administer tattoos indicates the extent of tattooing’s significance within the culture. For the

Figure 4



*Traditional Tongan male tattoo. Drawing by d’Urville, early 1800s. Areas that appear to be solid black are actually fine and closely spaced patterns.*

Samoans, tattooing held similar religious significance. In Samoan culture, tattooing occurred during a ceremony in which the tattoo artist tattooed groups of six to eight young men. As a part of the tattooing ritual, friends and relatives would attend the ceremony and participate in special prayers and celebrations (Gilbert 23).

Among the indigenous tribes of North America, tattooing was used as visual indicators of an individual's place within the tribe. For the Osage and the Omaha tattoos held significance in warfare. A skull tattooed on the back of an Osage warrior, for example, indicated that he had been successful in battle. Likewise, the successes of Omaha men on the battlefield were honored by tattoos on their daughters' backs or breasts (Gay 26). The Inuit practiced tattooing as well. Inuit men tattooed marks on their bodies as a tally system to keep track of how many whales they killed. Inuit women were typically tattooed on their chins as an indication of marital status (Gay 26). In all of these cases, tattoos were used as a way to communicate. American anthropologist Ted Polhemus recognizes the importance of tattooing especially in societies that lack written language. He states, "contrasting tattoo styles of particular individuals within a group often articulate and underline differences in role and status – immediately identifying the chief [and] those who have shown courage in battle or prowess in the hunt" (Polhemus 40). Indigenous North Americans perfectly exemplify the tattooing usage outlined by Polhemus. Tattooing for these and other tribes was used to set individuals apart – to visually communicate an individuals' place in society. Tattoos represented pride and exacted honor and respect.

As a status symbol, tattoos were also used to subjugate various members of society. In certain societies tattooing was used as a form of punishment and as a way to distinguish slaves from free members of society. Figure 5 pictures Olive Oatman, a woman who was captured by Native Americans in 1851 at the age of thirteen. Her family had been traveling with a sect of the Mormon Church that was moving from Missouri to California when their wagon was attacked by Native Americans near what is

Figure 5



*Study portrait of Olive Oatman, circa 1860.*

now Yuma, Arizona. She was later sold to the Mohave tribe, who despite treating her well, tattooed her chin with the traditional mark of a slave – five parallel lines on the chin with the outermost lines having a differing design adjoining them. The ancient Greeks also practiced tattooing slaves starting in the fifth century. The Greeks adopted the practice from their enemy, the Persians, who allegedly tattooed Greek prisoners of war. Beyond simply distinguishing them from law-abiding citizens, Greeks marked slaves and criminals with “descriptions of their crimes tattooed on their foreheads, including in one case the words, ‘Stop me, I’m a runaway’” (Gay 24). Though tattoos in these societies were used to stigmatize certain groups

(slaves and criminals), the societies did not necessarily stigmatize tattooing in general. In fact tattooing was a universal custom within the Mohave tribe. The Mohave believed that men and women alike had to have a tattoo in order to be granted entrance into the afterlife upon death. Mohave tribe members that did not get tattoos during their lifetime were often tattooed postmortem to adhere to the belief (Tattoo Archive).

Regardless of what function tattooing plays within particular societies, the phenomenon revealed through this examination is that tattooing was a very common practice within prehistoric societies. An introductory statement for a body art exhibit at New York’s American Museum of Natural History in 2000 stated, “There is no known culture in which people do not paint, pierce, tattoo, reshape, or simply adorn their bodies” (Gay 14). Body decoration appears to be a universal practice among people of all societies. Anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists have all attempted to explain why this is so – why humans decorate their body and why body decoration seems to be a human

universal. But explanation aside, the fact that it is present in all cultures suggests that societies should perceive body adornment as an acceptable practice or at least as an integral part of culture.

Tattooing is thought to be independently invented.<sup>2</sup> Tattooing within the island cultures of Polynesia lends support to this theory. In his journal *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*, Georg H. von Langsdorff notes, “It is undoubtedly striking, that nations perfectly remote from each other, who have no means of intercourse whatever, and according to what appears to us never could have any, should yet be all agreed in this practice” (qtd. in Gilbert 26). The practice to which von Langsdorff refers is tattooing. The distance between the Polynesian islands were far too great to make cultural exchange common. Therefore it can be assumed that rather than one culture inventing the practice of tattooing and sharing it with other island cultures, tattooing was invented by several cultures independent from one another. This is further supported by the fact that tattooing was present in the African civilizations as well – civilizations that had no known contact with Polynesians. Tattooing as an independent invention expands upon the concept of ubiquity. If tattooing was independently invented, then tattooing could not have been unwillingly forced upon a culture by another. Tattooing within those civilizations that invented the practice existed not as a forced habit, but as a custom – in that it was as much a part of the civilizations’ culture as religious rituals. Tattooing was a part of life.

## **Diffusion of Tattoos to the Western World**

Tattoos were brought to the Western World by the European explorers who had discovered the practice among native Polynesians. Not only did many of the sailors return home brandishing tattoos

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<sup>2</sup>Independent invention refers to the phenomenon when a particular custom appears within several different societies that are geographically isolated from each other. Independent invention counters the suspicion that the custom in question emerged from one culture and spread to other cultures – with succeeding cultures adopting the custom from the original inventing culture.



(having acquired tattoos as souvenirs of their voyages), but they also brought with them tattooed natives. On his second voyage in 1774 Captain Cook brought back two tattooed Tahitians, Omai and Tupia (DeMello 48). These Tahitians had originally served as guides and interpreters for Cook during his voyage, but upon return to England they quickly became objects displayed at pubs, museums, and fairs (De Mello 47-48). Omai, Tupia, and other captives like them were held as specimens of native peoples. The framing of tattoos in the context of entertainment shaped how Europeans perceived tattooing in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Anthropologist Ted Polhemus states that during this time period, "for Europeans, tattooing became inexorably linked with the exotic – something that strange people in very distant lands did to their bodies" (Polhemus 42). Europeans were fascinated with the exotic and eagerly paid money to see tattooed attractions, making the capture and display of tattooed natives an extremely lucrative business. But the association with the exotic, consequently resulted in the additional association of tattoos with inferiority. During the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, Europeans viewed tattoos as "marks of savagery" and as "a hallmark of the primitive" (DeMello 49, 47). Tattoo attractions at world fairs in particular exemplify the extent to which tattoos existed as an indicator of "primitiveness." At world fairs, tattoo attractions were displayed alongside exhibits of Western achievement. By contrasting achievements such as technological advancements with "primitive activities" such as tattooing, world fairs not only highlighted Western progress, but also effectively constructed "a narrative about tattooed people as savages" (DeMello 47). Because tattoos stood at the heart of what distinguished the indigenous individuals from the Europeans – and more importantly what distinguished between 'primitive' and 'civilized' classifications – tattoos, more so than any other cultural practices, were viewed as signs of inferiority. It is this perception of inferiority that gave rise to the stigmatization of tattooed individuals regardless of cultural background.

The same association with exoticism that rendered tattooing a savage practice also served as a lure for their acquisition. In particular European royalty and members of the upper class sought to

obtain the distinctive marks. How these two differing attitudes toward tattoos during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries could exist in such paradox has yet to be explained. However, inferences can be made by examining anthropologist Margo DeMello's insight on the role of sailors in popularizing tattoos. DeMello believes that sailors acted as middlemen in tattooing's transition from being perceived as primitive to becoming an integral part of working-class life. This explanation fails to explain the popularity tattooing experienced among the upper class that occurred before it experienced popularity among the masses. Yet DeMello's insight may be able to explain both surges in popularity. As an explanation to the increase in tattooing's popularity among working-class men, DeMello states that tattooing's transition from taboo to trend originated "in the lifestyle of sailors and what this represented to working-class men back home: adventure, travel, exotic lands and people, and a free spirit" (49). Applied to upper class Europeans, it can be speculated that they too were drawn to the sense of adventure and excitement that tattoos presented. In fact, some European royalty embarked on actual "adventures" simply to acquire a tattoo. Britain's King George V and Russia's Tsar Nicholas II journeyed to Japan, after it was re-opened to the world in 1854, specifically to acquire tattoos (Polhemus 42).

Tattoos' association with the exotic appealed to the upper class and transformed tattoos into social capital. Tattoos became indicators of status. While the upper class viewed tattoos as indicators of cultural knowledge (tattooed Europeans were thought to be "cultured"), the middle and lower classes viewed tattoos as simply indicators of wealth. Specifically, tattoos indicated that the bearer had enough wealth to travel to exotic locations around the world or hire an emerging tattoo artist to acquire the tattoos. The upper class also could afford the time required for tattooing. Until the late nineteenth century, tattooing was still performed manually using a set of needles attached to a wooden handle. Borrowing techniques from the Polynesians, a tattoo artist "dipped the needles in ink and moved his hand up and down rhythmically, puncturing the skin two or three times a second" (Gilbert 126). This technique was extremely time-consuming. Prior to the nineteenth century, the majority of the lower



classes worked in agriculture and could not afford any time beyond earning a living wage. Therefore, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century tattoos served to distinguish the upper class from the masses and consequently became associated with wealth and status.

## Tattoos in America

The arrival of tattooing to the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought revolutionary change to the practice. In 1891, New York tattoo artist Samuel O'Reilly patented the first electric tattoo machine. The machine was designed after Thomas Edison's perforating pen<sup>3</sup> and allowed tattoo artists to use several needles simultaneously (DeMello 50). Using the tattoo

Figure 6

(a) UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

SAMUEL F. O'REILLY, OF NEW YORK, N. Y.  
TATTOOING-MACHINE.

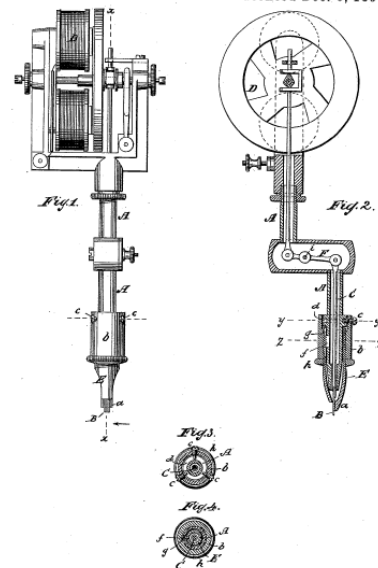
SPECIFICATION forming part of Letters Patent No. 464,801, dated December 8, 1891.  
Application filed July 14, 1891. Serial No. 399,721. (No model.)

To all whom it may concern:  
Be it known that I, SAMUEL F. O'REILLY, a citizen of the United States, residing at New York, in the county and State of New York, have invented new and useful Improvements in Tattooing-Machines, of which the following is a specification.  
My invention relates to a tattooing-machine, the peculiar and novel construction of which is pointed out in the following specification and claims, and illustrated in the accompanying drawings, in which—  
Figure 1 represents a front elevation. Fig. 2 is a longitudinal section in the plane *x-x*. Fig. 3 is a transverse section in the plane *y-y*. Fig. 4 is a similar section in the plane *z-z*.  
In the drawings, the letter A designates the handle of my tattooing-machine, said handle being made hollow, so that it is adapted to form the guide for the perforating-instrument B.  
In the example shown in the drawings this instrument is composed of five needles; but it may consist only of a single needle, or the number of needles which constitute the perforating-instrument may be changed to suit circumstances. The perforating-instrument B is secured to a rod C, which is geared with an electromotor D, mounted on the tubular handle, the device which serve to gear said motor with the rod C being made to pass through or being inclosed in the tubular handle, so that in grasping the handle the movement of the perforating-instrument is not disturbed.  
With the handle A is combined an ink-reservoir E, through which the perforating-instrument passes, and if a reciprocating motion is imparted to said perforating-instrument the point or points are supplied with ink, which enters the perforations made in the skin by said point or points.  
The ink-reservoir is provided with an extension *a*, which forms a guide whereby the operator is enabled to move the instrument so as to produce the required designs, and this extension also forms a space to regulate

perforating-instrument pass into the skin. 50  
For the purpose of adjusting the gages, I use a tube *s*, which is provided with an internal screw-thread and which revolves freely round on the handle A, being held in place by screws *o*, which engage a circular groove *d* in the handle. The tube *s* engages an external screw-thread on the ink-reservoir E, and this ink-reservoir is prevented from turning round on the handle by a feather-key *f* which engages a groove or slot *g* in the ink-reservoir. 60  
By turning the tube *s* the ink-reservoir E is moved in or out and the gages *e* can be adjusted in the required position. A thumb-nut *h* serves to lock the tube *s* in the required position. The rod C is geared with the electromotor by means of a lever F, which has its fulcrum on a stud *t*, so as to produce a comparatively large stroke of the perforating-instrument.  
What I claim as new, and desire to secure 70 by Letters Patent, is—  
1. The combination, with a tubular handle, of a tubular ink-reservoir movable along the lower end of the handle and provided with a gage, means for moving the ink-reservoir 75 through the handle to adjust the gage, and a perforating-instrument reciprocating through the handle and ink-reservoir, substantially as described.  
2. The combination, with a tubular handle, of a tubular screw-threaded ink-reservoir surrounding and movable along the lower end of the handle and having a gage, a screw-threaded tube carried by the handle and engaged with the ink-reservoir to adjust it longitudinally, and a needle reciprocating through the handle and ink-reservoir, 85 substantially as described.  
3. The combination, with a tubular handle, of a tubular screw-threaded ink-reservoir having a gage and movable longitudinally along but held against rotation on the handle, a screw-threaded tube swiveled to the handle and engaged with the ink-reservoir to adjust it longitudinally, and a needle reciprocating through the handle and ink-reservoir, 95 substantially as described.

(b)

(No Model.)  
S. F. O'REILLY,  
TATTOOING MACHINE,  
No. 464,801. Patented Dec. 8, 1891.



WITNESSES:

Edmond Wolff,  
William L. ...

INVENTOR:

Samuel F. O'Reilly,  
By  
Van Hooker & Humph.

United States Patent document (a) and drawing (b) of the first electric tattoo machine. Invented by Samuel O'Reilly. Patented on December 8, 1891. United States Patent No. 464,801

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Edison patented the perforating pen (Figure 6) in 1876 and 1877. The invention developed as a byproduct of Edison's telegraphy research. The pen of Edison's printing telegraph left a chemical residue as it punctured the paper. This observation led Edison to believe that the perforated paper could be used as a stencil for making copies. Thus Edison invented the electric pen as a perforating device (Burns). Samuel O'Reilly modified Edison's design in inventing the first electric tattoo machine.

machine, tattoos could be administered faster and for less money, making them available to the lower classes. Tattooing's ensuing popularity among the masses resulted in the abandonment of the practice by the upper class both in the United States and in Europe. Tattooing no longer represented novelty nor indicated status. Thus tattooing lost the exoticism and prestige that had lured the elite to the practice. Among the elite, perceptions of tattooing reverted back to its association with the concept of primitiveness. In this way the elite continued to separate themselves from the lower classes.

The effect of a new environment on tattooing was a reinvention of its appearance in society. Tattooing as a cultural practice underwent what anthropologist Margo DeMello calls "Americanization" (49). She states, "Tattooing was [...] modified by early US tattooist to fit a local sensibility emphasizing patriotism rather than exoticism" (DeMello 49). Tattooing's association with patriotism developed primarily as a result of its popularity among military personnel. In his New York shop, Martin Hildebrandt – the first known professional tattoo artist in the United States – tattooed mostly sailors and soldiers. His tattoo work on soldiers from both sides of the Civil War has caused many tattoo historians to recognize Hildebrandt as being "instrumental in establishing the US tradition of tattooed servicemen" (DeMello 49). Indeed tattooing has been extremely popular among the armed forces throughout American history. During the period between the two World Wars, "the link between soldiers and sailors and tattooing was so strong [...] that it was assumed a man with tattoos was serving in the armed forces or had been at one time" (DeMello 63). Consequently, tattooing during that time experienced the highest level of social approval and the era became known as the Golden Age of Tattooing (DeMello 63). Popularity among servicemen built up tattooing's rapport among Americans. It appeared that American society willingly extended the respect it granted to servicemen to the servicemen's tattoos. In addition, tattooing had become synonymous with patriotism and nationalism. Individuals eagerly acquired tattoos in order to express their national pride.

Despite its positive association with patriotism, tattooing still carried a stigma in the United States prior to the twentieth century. Since its introduction to the country, tattooing had become extremely popular, but had not necessarily experienced widespread acceptance. The strongest evidence of tattooing's stigma is the absence of women among those who acquired tattoos during that time. Not only were women simply not partaking in the practice, tattoo artists were actively preventing women from acquiring tattoos. It was not uncommon for a tattoo artist to have a policy of refusing to tattoo a woman. The perception of women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries explains the motivation behind these prohibitive policies. During this time period, known in history as the Victorian era<sup>4</sup>, women were seen as poised and pure. In keeping with this perception, women dressed in modest clothing and did not wear any adornments or jewelry. Tattoos on women during this era, therefore, corrupted the feminine image of purity and may have even been linked to promiscuity. Anthropologist Margo DeMello describes tattoo artists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as guardians of the female image. She states, "The tattooist, like the woman's other male keepers, took it upon himself to keep 'nice girls' (i.e. attractive, middle-class, heterosexual women) from transgressing the class and sexual borders of the time and of turning into tramps" (DeMello 61). Society's concern of tattoos' corruptive influence on women suggests that society perceived tattoos as corrupt, immoral or unclean. Tattoos may have been acceptable for soldiers and sailors, roughened by the gravity of war, but tattoos among the non-military society was seen as transgressive – violating the particular morals defining appearance at that time.

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<sup>4</sup> The Victorian era, which lasted from 1819 to 1901, drew its name from the reigning Queen of England at the time Queen Victoria. Among medical, technological and economic advances, the period is known for the family values and work ethic it fostered. The ideal 'Victorian' woman possessed social deference, chastity, and respectability (Shepherd). In the United States the feminine ideal of the time was outlined by the cartoon character known as the Gibson Girl. She possessed similar qualities of sophistication and modesty.

## The Circus

Tattooed natives continued to be displayed publicly as entertainment throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Abolitionist movements during the twentieth century, however, caused such displays to lose public favor. The tattooed natives, receiving no pay for their entertainment, were viewed by the public as being essentially slaves. It is at this time that tattooed attractions transitioned from displaying tattooed indigenous people to tattooed Westerners. Regardless of this change, anthropologist Margo DeMello argues that the continuation of tattooed attractions “relied on the continuing association between tattooing and savagery in order to sell tickets” (53). Simply the existence of tattooed attractions established the perception of tattooing as savage-like. Tattooed westerners were promoted as human oddities or freaks and were displayed in what appropriately became known as freak shows. Labeling these tattooed individuals as freaks necessarily ostracized them from society and portrayed tattoos as freakish or abnormal. In many cases, tattooed individuals on display concocted erroneous tales that detailed their capture and forced tattooing by “savages.”<sup>5</sup> For example, the first tattooed white man exhibited in the United States, James O’Connell, claimed to have been shipwrecked in Micronesia where he married one of the chief’s daughters and was tattooed by Micronesian natives (DeMello 56). Westerners had embraced tattooing, yet placed the guilt of committing such a transgressive act on people considered in those times to be primitive. This deferral of accountability suggests the persisting view of tattooing as being barbaric or uncivilized. Society collectively denied any possibility of Westerners’ intentional acquisition of tattoos – especially such dramatic tattoos as those displayed at circus shows. However, in the late nineteenth century circus

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<sup>5</sup> The story of Olive Oatman (previously mentioned in the section *Origins of Tattooing*) was one of the rare cases of a tattooed Westerner during the nineteenth century who had actually been captured and tattooed by an indigenous group.

Figure 7

# THE CIRCUS

Artoria Gibbons. Tattooed by her husband Red Gibbons in the 1920s.



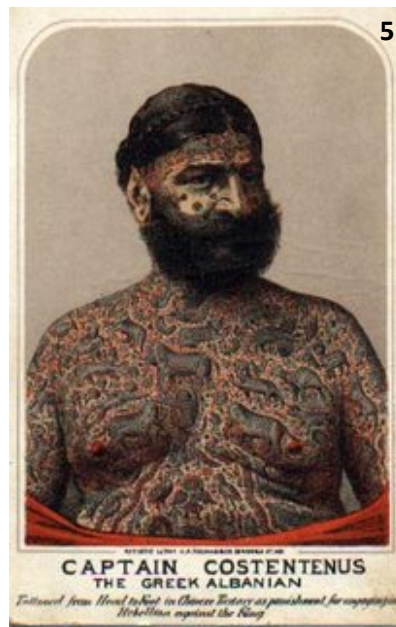
Edith Burchett. Tattooed by her husband famous tattoo artist George Burchett.



Self-named "The Great Omi," Horace Ridler was tattooed by George Burchett in the 1930s during 500 sittings. Ridler got the tattoos purposely to become a show attraction. He was displayed at Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not Odditorium (Tattoo Archive).



Charles Wagner (seated), "the most talented and prolific of the early American tattoo artists," and tattooed circus people in Chatham Square, circa 1930. The woman seated is tattoo artist Mildred Hull (Gilbert 127, 130).



Prince Costentenus, the "most remarkable tattooed man of the 1800s" was put on exhibition by P.T. Barnum. The only part of his body not tattooed was the soles of his feet (The Human Marvel).



Satisfied customer. Tattooed by famous tattoo artist George Burchett.



entertainment thrived on the ambitions of Westerners to undergo intense tattooing and display themselves as living attractions.

The story of Horace Ridler, self-proclaimed “The Great Omi,” illustrates the success, eccentricity and even competitiveness of tattooed attractions during the early twentieth century. Shortly after entering the profession, Ridler became unsatisfied with his wages. Intense competition within the sideshow business had lessened the grandeur of his tattoos. Tattoo historian Steve Gilbert reports that “by 1920, over three hundred completely tattooed people were employed in circus and “sideshows” (138). Committed to the profession, Ridler decided to transform himself into a human zebra. In the 1930s he hired London’s top tattooist, George Burchett, to tattoo a “heavy curvilinear design” over his entire body including his face (DeMello 56).

Circus performer’s embodiment of tattoos at a time when society held a negative perception of tattooing established tattooing’s longstanding marginality. Due to their eccentric lifestyle, circus performers were ostracized from mainstream society. Whereas opinion leaders may have been able to influence society’s perception of tattoos, circus performers reduced tattoos to a marginal status. In succeeding eras, tattooing’s marginal nature persisted and developed into a pattern in which differing times merely saw a change in the particular marginalized group bearing tattoos.

## **Negativity in the Forties and Fifties**

Mid-twentieth century marks the period when tattooing’s association with deviance first took root. Anthropologist Margo DeMello describes the time period as “the period that solidified postwar society’s negative views of tattooing” (67). Though laws had been established before World War II that set a legal minimum age requirement for tattooing, state governments struggled to enforce them during the war. After the war, however, the government began rigorously regulating tattooing practices. Not

only were age limits strictly enforced, but municipal authorities conducted health inspections of tattoo parlors to ensure that tattoo artists were following safety procedures, such as using clean needles. Outbreaks of hepatitis – thought to be caused by unsafe tattooing procedures – further propelled these inspections and even resulted in the banning of tattooing all together in several states during the 1960s (DeMello 66). The heightened regulations during this time period reflected society’s general perception of tattooing. Tattooing had gone beyond breaking social comfort barriers – threatening society’s health. Society perceived tattoos to be dangerous on account of its health risks as well as the deviant behavior that seemed to develop in conjunction with tattooing. Prevailing socio-biological perspectives – particularly those of criminologist Cesare Lombroso – influenced the development of associations between tattooing and deviant behavior. Lombroso argued that criminality (an individual’s propensity to be a criminal) could be determined by an individual’s physical attributes. Among the physical traits Lombroso claimed indicated inherent deviance was the attribute of having “little sensitivity to pain” (qtd. in Adams “Marked Difference” 270). Though explicit mention of tattoos was absent from Lombroso’s report, society interpreted high tolerance for pain as an explanation for the tendency of criminals to be tattooed. This logic led society to believe that a tattoo on an individual was “the external sign of inward moral obtuseness” (Gibson qtd in Adams “Marked Difference” 270). Tattooing no longer appeared to be an act of savagery but an act of immorality.

Links between tattooing and marginalized groups during the late 1940s to late 1950s also contributed to society adopting a negative view of tattoos. In the 1940s outlaw motorcyclist gangs (more commonly known as “bikers”) began emerging as a sub-cultural group. In addition to their common interest in motorcycles, bikers united around their attraction to tattoos. Biker tattoos often expressed anti-social sentiment. Because bikers lived on the margins of society, tattoos became associated with social detachment and deviance. Tattoos were common among criminal gangs as well. Tattoos played a major role in gangs before the 1940s, but it is the media attention that these tattooed

gangs received during that time that had an impact on tattoo's social acceptance. For example, riots between servicemen and Chicano gangs in Los Angeles during the 1940s highlighted the tattooing that existed in the Pachuco culture (DeMello 67). In reporting the event newspapers and other media sources stirred up anti-Mexican American sentiments<sup>6</sup>— wrongly focusing the negative publicity on



young Chicano victims (Pagán 224). Regardless of truth or impartial reporting, the publicity of tattoos on reported “gang” members linked tattoos with criminal behavior in the public’s mind. In addition, anthropologist Margo DeMello argues that “knowledge about the Nazi practice of tattooing Jews in the concentration camps probably contributed to tattooing’s downfall in the United States” (See Figure 14) (67).



<sup>1</sup> July 15, 1945: Jewish youth who survived Nazi concentration camps show their tattooed identification numbers. <sup>2</sup> December 9, 2004: Holocaust survivor Leon Greenman (age 93) displays his tattooed number at the Jewish Museum in London.

## Tattoo Renaissance

The liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s brought improvements to the tattooing profession and broadened the perceptions of tattoos in the United States. Though the style was present in the United States before this time, Japanese tattooing became particularly popular among Americans in the 1970s. Japanese tattooing differed from American tattooing in its fluidity and use of the body as a

<sup>6</sup>On June 3, 1943 approximately fifty sailors stationed at the Naval Reserve Training School in Los Angeles stormed through Mexican American neighborhoods stripping zoot suits off of Chicano teenagers (Pagán 223). (Zoot suits had been the current fashion among Chicano males.) A week of rioting ensued predominately in which military personnel terrorized Mexican Americans with little to no intervention by Los Angeles police. The Hearst Press, owned by William Randolph Hearst, stood at the head of the media’s anti-Mexican American campaign (Pagán 224).



three-dimensional object rather than a two-dimensional surface. Compared to tattoos executed by Japanese tattooists, American tattoos appeared to be “a series of small, independent, badge-like designs placed haphazardly on the body” (DeMello 74). The Japanese avoided awkward pieces of blank skin between tattoos by integrating tattoos into a thematic background, typically consisting of wind or water, and creating movement within the overall artwork. According to anthropologist Margo DeMello, Japanese tattoos at that time were “thought to be modern, sophisticated and linked to the more spiritual and refined East” (DeMello 75). It is this spirituality, vibrancy and illusion of movement that most likely attracted the free-spirits of the sixties and seventies to the Japanese style of tattooing. The adoption of Japanese techniques ushered American tattooing into the art world. Tattooing suddenly held aesthetic value. In fact, tattooing’s legitimacy as an art form was further solidified by the “dramatic increase in the number of university-trained artists in the 1970s and 1980s” (Kosut “Mad Artists” 87). Sociologist Mary Kosut argues that “the discourses and techniques acquired in various art programs” that entered the tattooing world in the 1970s “influenced the creation of new tattoo styles [...] as well as a commitment to innovation and experimentation” (“Mad Artists” 88). Influences from the art world caused society to view tattooing more as an art form than a destructive or deviant practice. Thus attitudes toward tattoos improved. In addition, starting in the 1970s, the tattooing industry began improving the sanitary conditions within tattoo shops – after receiving criticism for hepatitis outbreaks decades earlier. These improvements established tattooing as a professional business. Individuals who had been previously turned off by tattooing’s griminess – a sentiment most likely founded on tattooing’s circus ties – now recognized tattooing as a legitimate practice.

Of greater significance to tattooing’s transformation during the 1960s and 1970s was its adoption by the revolution-crazed youth. Anthropologist Ted Polhemus believes that “the tattoo renaissance may well have remained confined to the experiments of a handful of enthusiasts were it not for the youthquake and counterculture revolutions that shook the world in the second half of the

1960s” (48). Ironically, as tattooing gained legitimacy during this time, its prevalence among the youth existed primarily as an act of deviance. As prominent proponents of the cultural revolution, the youth of the sixties and seventies embraced tattooing as a means to rebel against the “establishment.” Like ripped jeans, bare feet, and love beads, tattoos became the garb sported by individuals promoting peace and freedom in a period marked by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement (Gay 37). Therefore despite greater acceptance of tattooing as a professional industry, tattooing continued to be associated with deviance and marginalized groups.

## ***Tattoos Today***

Now in the twenty-first century tattooing is experiencing wide-spread acceptance. More people – and a more diverse group of people – are getting tattooed. In 2003 a Harris poll reported that approximately 16% of Americans have at least one tattoo. In 2005, just two years later, the American Society of Dermatological Surgery reported that the percentage of Americans that have at least one tattoo had increased to 24% – nearly one in every four Americans (Keel 18). These statistics seem to suggest that tattoos are no longer exclusive to the particular sub-cultural groups they have been associated with in the past. While tattoos still remain prominent within these groups, many individuals getting tattoos today do not fall under the stereotypes of bikers, inmates, gang members or military personnel. A definition of the “tattooed individual” no longer exists.

## **Tattoos in the Media**

Explanations vary on why so many people are getting tattoos as well as how society now perceives tattoos considering its growing popularity. The media has an enormous influence in propelling the “tattooed” trend and determining social response to increased tattooing. The media has the power to regulate how much attention is given to tattoos and how audiences process and evaluate the

information. Starting in the 1990s, tattoos appeared in every facet of the media including magazines, popular and scholarly literature, movies, and the entertainment industry at large. Simply the prevalence of tattoos in the media has affected society's perception of tattoos by increasing society's exposure to tattoos. Increased exposure is critical in normalizing<sup>7</sup> the practice. The more aware society is of tattooing, the more tattooing is accepted into society. Television shows such as LA Ink and Miami Ink go beyond normal exposure to show audiences the behind-the-scenes activities of two famous tattoo parlors. In his article "Tattooed: Body Art goes Mainstream" Tim Keel highlights the unique manner in which LA Ink and Miami Ink present tattooing. He states, "These shows allow people who might never enter the tattoo world to take a front-row seat in the safety and comfort of their living rooms," (Keel 18). More and more Americans are partaking in what Keel nicknames the "tattoo world" by simply reading, watching or hearing about tattooing through media outlets. Though these individuals may just be spectators, their interest in tattooing advances the prevalence and popularity of tattoos in society.

In general the media's focus has been to cultivate interest in tattoos. The media has no motive to persuade their audience to acquire tattoos. Rather the media is motivated by what sells. Tattoos sell. Regardless of personal perceptions, society in general is interested in learning more information about the tattooing. In seeking to provide society with this information, the media has manipulated society's perception of tattooing. Cultural anthropologist Margo DeMello notes that media today has reframed tattooing in order to strengthen its appeal. Upon analyzing a collection of articles on tattoos DeMello

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<sup>7</sup> One of the definitions for normalize is "to remove strains and reduce coarse crystalline structures in metal" ("Normative"). While this definition pertains to metallurgy, it provides insight into its sociological use here. The process of normalizing tattoos can be understood as removing "strains" – or rather removing the stigma associated with the practice. A more appropriate definition of normalize for sociological purposes is the definition "to make normal, especially to cause to conform to a standard or norm," ("Normative"). In conjunction with the first definition, a new norm validating tattooing appears to replace the previous stigma.

found that writers generally tend to emphasize the differences between those who got tattoos in the past and those who get tattoos today. Through this technique, the media has successfully conveyed that “tattooing is no longer a disreputable enterprise” and has reframed tattooing as a practice for a “new tattooed generation” (DeMello 98; DeMello qtd. in Adams “Bodies of Change” 106). This “new tattooed generation” does not necessarily reflect reality. It is instead a concept designed by the media. DeMello notes that articles on tattoos tend to portray those getting tattooed as being highly educated and holding white-collar jobs. By focusing on these characteristics of tattooed individuals, the media has replaced the image society typically conceptualizes as a tattooed individual with a new image. The image of a tattooed individual is no longer of a rebellious – perhaps immoral – deviant, but of an upstanding, respectable citizen. The media has further succeeded in reframing the perception of tattooed individuals by being selective in the types of individuals chosen to be featured in a particular article. For example, DeMello notes that mainstream articles on tattoos do not interview “bikers and other non-middle-class tattoo wearers” – those types of individuals that have been associated with tattoos in past decades. Instead the media interviews tattooed individuals falling within the categories of “students, secretaries, artists, teachers [...] and other members of the middle class considered respectable” (DeMello 100). This categorization narrows the range of tattooed individuals to middle class professionals. Tattoos may still be present among marginalized, sub-cultural groups, but the media has chosen to exclude those groups from its focus. The intent of such an exclusion is to influence audiences’ perception of the issue being studied. Middle class professionals are generally perceived as having morals and demonstrating acceptable social behavior. Therefore, drawing on this perception, the media has portrayed tattoos as an acceptable social practice.

The transformation of movie roles played by tattooed characters serves as an example of how the media has redefined the conceptualization of tattooed individuals. In her article “An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos” Mary Kosut focuses on the role of the entertainment

industry in popularizing tattoos. The 2002 blockbuster movie *xXx* serves as her primary example. The visual focus of the movie's advertising campaign centered around the image of the main character's heavily tattooed body. The intent was to emphasize the character's social

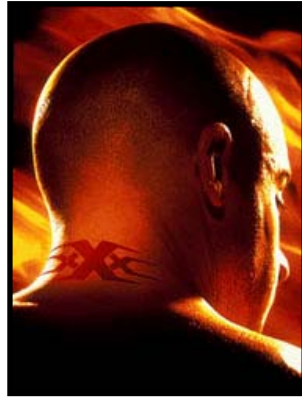


Figure 9

*Movie poster promoting the 2002 blockbuster xXx. The xXx tattoo prominently placed on the back of actor Vin Diesel's neck was the focus of many of the billboards also used in the movie's advertising campaign.*



detachment and rebellious nature. However, the campaign inadvertently elevated the status of tattoos. The main character, Xander Cage (played by Vin Diesel), perfectly exemplifies the “tattooed” stereotype. He is an anarchist, an extreme sport enthusiast and in general, an outcast of society. Yet he is also the hero. Therefore, instead of reinforcing the stigma associated with tattoos, tattoos are portrayed in a positive light. The fact that the movie glorifies a tattooed protagonist presents tattoos as acceptable – cool even (Kosut “An Ironic Fad” 1037).

Similarly tattooed celebrities and athletes have enhanced tattoos' appeal. Celebrities did not really start getting tattoos until the 1990s. The 1990s marked the height of tattooing's popularity in the United States. The fact that celebrities were getting tattooed at this time could be interpreted as merely members of society following a social trend. Though their fame often sets them apart, celebrities are as much a member of society as any individual, and as such, are just as likely to concede to a current fashion. However, it is because of their fame that their interest in tattoos is not seen as an example of

conceding to a trend but as one giving rise to a trend. When viewed in this manner, why celebrities started getting tattoos becomes unimportant. The importance is their influence in further popularizing tattoos. In American culture, celebrities' roles extend beyond their job titles to include fashion icon, role model and all around public figure. Society, in essence, looks to celebrities to set social norms. When celebrities began coming out in public with tattoos on their bodies, society accepted tattoos as a new social norm. It is this social norm that some sociologists believe spurred tattoos' popularity among non-celebrity individuals in the 1990s. More so than a fashion statement, celebrities' display of their tattoos served as a statement of acceptance. Tattoos became permissible. Celebrities debunked the stereotypical tattooed individual and elevated tattoos to a higher status. Those wishing to express themselves through tattoos felt that they could do so after seeing celebrities proudly wearing tattoos. Before the rise of tattoo popularity among celebrities, these individuals may have felt that they would be ostracized, marginalized or in some way scorned for their tattoos.

## Commodification of Tattoos

Increasing prevalence of tattoos in the media has caused some sociologists to look at the increasing popularity of tattoos as commodification of the practice. Many individuals believe that commodification of tattoos only consists of cases in which tattoos are being advertised, bought, or sold as a commodity. However, the concept of the commodification of tattoos encompasses all cases in which tattoos are present in the commercial world. Tattoos in commerce may not promote the actual, physical consumption of tattoos (that is, getting a tattoo) at all. The presence of tattoos in the children's toy market is an excellent example where tattoos do not directly benefit the tattoo industry economically. Toy dolls, including arguably the most famous doll: Barbie, now have tattoos as optional accessories (See Figure 10). Tattoo dolls come with instructions showing children how to "tattoo" the doll themselves and often include a temporary tattoo children can wear. It can be generally understood

that tattoo artists and studios do not use toys as a medium for product placement. However, tattoos presence in the toy market is useful in highlighting the extent tattoos have permeated society. At an early age children are instilled with the idea that tattoos are acceptable. Studies show that it is much easier for children to learn and retain a second language than it is for adults. In the same way, social



norms and behaviors learned as a child have a greater influence and a higher retention rate than those learned as an adult. When these children mature, tattoos will most likely be even more popular than they are today, simply due to their early exposure.



Figure 10

*BARBIE® Totally STYLIN' TATTOOS™ Doll by Mattel. The description found below the product on Mattel's online store is as follows: "Your daughter will love getting creative with these super-stylish tattoos! Using the tattoo stamper, she can design and decorate her doll's awesome outfits – and even apply temporary tattoos to herself. How hip and trendy!"*

In recent years, advertisers have turned to tattoo art for inspiration; however, tattoos in advertisement remained taboo for years past their break-out popularity in the 1990s. Advertisement's hesitation in embracing tattoos as a design scheme suggests the continued presence of a stigma plaguing tattoos. Particularly in fashion, tattoos on models were considered taboo. If models happened to have tattoos, the marks were creatively covered by clothing or simply airbrushed for photographs.

Though tattoos are still rarely seen on runway models, print ads today display tattooed models. In some cases, tattoos appear to have been digitally added to photographs using Photoshop. Figure 11

shows print ads in which the actual physical existence of tattoos on the model's skin is debatable. The ad promoting Idpanema sandals (Figure 11:3) features a heavily tattooed Gisele, a famous Brazilian model. Images of Gisele from other media sources, including live footage, indicate that Gisele, in fact, does not have a full-body tattoo. The digital placement of tattoos in photographs can be seen as tools advertisers use to in some way enhance their campaign. In the ad promoting Rush® chocolate milk (Figure 11:1), marketers capitalized on the association of tattoos with rebellion to reinforce their slogan: "Just a Little Naughty." In contrast, tattoos inspired the actual product design of a Converse® shoe. The use of a facial tattoo in the Converse® ad (Figure 11:5) further promotes that design.

Regardless of the intent, tattoos in advertisement has become commonplace and has even transcended the cognizant to the subliminal. In his article "Tattoo Art Flows into Mainstream Ads" Azam Ahmed states, "Marketers are doing more than showcasing tattoo-covered models. They're also applying tattoo culture's aesthetic to graphic images and typefaces." Even if subtly – through the use of fonts mimicking tattoo ink on product labels – companies are increasingly tapping into tattoos' popularity in an attempt to appeal to a younger audience. These companies believe that their products' association with a growing design trend will lure new buyers and reinvigorate loyal customers to buy their product. To help with styling, advertisers are actually hiring tattoo artists to sketch artwork for product labels (Ahmed). Not only does this authenticate the designs, the employment of tattoo artists in the marketing world further legitimizes tattooing as an art form. Tattoos' appearance in advertisement has been a vital frontier in tattoos' expanding popularity due to advertisements' enormous influence in shaping society's perception of culture. Tattooed models send the message that tattoos do not destroy beauty but can serve to enhance it. Tattoos used in print ads showcase the creativity cultivated through the art of tattooing. Tattoos in advertisement in general serve as an indicator of tattooing's prominence in American culture and further elevates its status within society.



TATTOOS

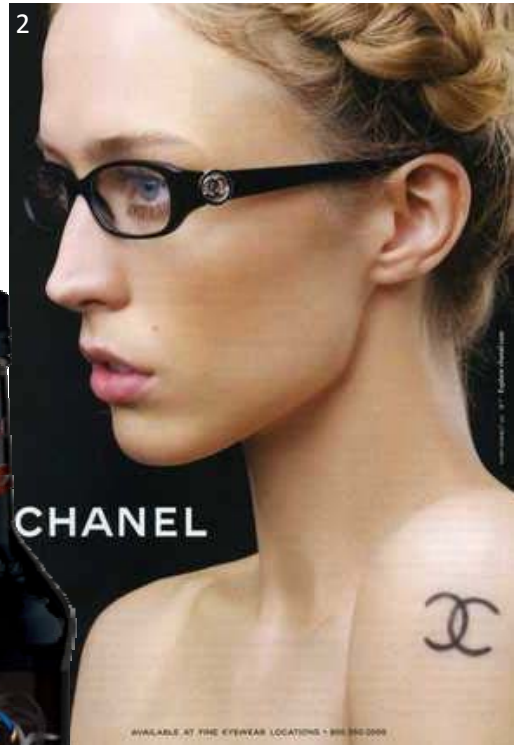


Figure 11

AROUND THE WORLD: AUSTRALIA: <sup>1</sup>Rush® chocolate milk by Parmalat Ltd. FRANCE: <sup>2</sup>Chanel® Eyewear. BRAZIL: <sup>3</sup>Ipanema Gisele Bündchen Sandals. UNITED STATES: <sup>4</sup>Post-It® by 3M. <sup>5</sup>Converse® shoes. <sup>6</sup>Captain Morgan®Tattoo® spiced rum.

ADVERTISING

## Tattoos and Body Image

Rising tattoo popularity can also be attributed to American's increasing preoccupation with body image. The media is again the culprit in America's obsession with body appearances. The *Psychological Bulletin* reports that "repeated exposure to media content lead viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality" (Grabe et al. 460). This engineered perception of reality results in what is called the "ideal body type." Typically psychologists and sociologist have studied the ideal body type as it pertains to individuals' self-view of body weight. Yet the ideal body type defines the ideal appearance of more physical aspects than simply weight. For example, the ideal body type also includes smooth, unblemished skin – an ideal that directly relates to tattoo acquisition.

Individuals generally strive to achieve the ideal body outlined by the media or at least feel that they need to achieve the ideal body to be socially accepted.<sup>8</sup> Thus, body ideals created by the media have the affect of either encouraging or discouraging individuals from participating in body modification. In fact a trend that has grown parallel to preoccupation with body image is the attraction towards body modification. Magazines, celebrities, and television shows (such as Extreme Makeover) have not only popularized beauty attainment; they have popularized beauty attainment through drastic, often surgical, means. Tattooing is not excluded from these body modification practices. Sociologist Michael Atkinson compares tattooing to other forms of body modification intended for beauty attainment. He states, "Just as cosmetic surgery, dieting, and exercising empower practitioners by generating culturally revered body shapes, tattooing produces aesthetically enhanced and socially acknowledged bodies,"

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<sup>8</sup>The notion that individuals strive to achieve the ideal body type stems from social comparison theory. According to an article published by the American Psychological Association, "Social comparison theory states that we seek to compare ourselves with others" (Bessenoff 239). One particular type of social comparison, upward social comparison, pertains to the affect the ideal body type has in motivating individuals to alter their body. In upward social comparison, individuals compare themselves "to others [they] perceive to be socially better than [them]selves" (Bessenoff 240). When there are discrepancies between an individual's body and the body to which it is compared (here the ideal body type), individuals are "motivated to change the self to be more like the comparison standard" (Bessenoff 240).

(Atkinson 133). With their rising popularity, tattoos are now considered one way in which individuals can improve their appearance.

In contrast, pressure to fit an ideal body type may propel individuals to acquire tattoos not out of a desire to conform but out of a desire to rebel. Tattooing as an act of defiance suggests that tattooing's popularity today may not be due to increased acceptance. Rather, tattooing as an act of defiance plays on the social perception of tattooing as being immoral or unclean. In this context tattoos signify an individual's rejection of the ideal body type and the institution that dictates norms defining appearance. Acquiring tattoos may also be seen as a method in which individuals can reclaim control over their bodies. Sociologist Lauren Langman describes the ideal body type as a "mass-produced selfhood" (664). Langman's diction paints a picture of a conveyor belt of human beings that appear more like mannequins than living creatures. The effect of the repetition of certain physical attributes in the media's portrayal of beauty is a minimization of individuality and an emphasis on conformity. External pressures to conform strip individuals of control over their own bodies. By taking an active role in the creation of appearance, an individual's choice to acquire a tattoo can be seen as establishing a sense of self. Sociologist Michael Atkinson describes tattooing as "customizing the body in pursuit of individuality" or "literally illustrating individuality" (134-135). Tattoos have the ability to set individuals apart from one another far greater than clothing styles. Because individuals have complete discretion in choosing a design, it is highly unlikely that any other marked individual will sport the same tattoo. Thus tattooed individuals have the ability to create an appearance that stands out from the crowd. In addition, tattoos take on personal meanings that reaffirm an individual's unique identity.

## Modern Perceptions of Tattoos

Tattooing in modern society exists in a state of complexity. Increased popularity of tattoos – as evident by its prevalence in the media and the growing numbers of tattooed individuals – seems to

suggest society's acceptance of tattooing as a social norm. However, sociologist Josh Adams argues that "the practice of tattooing still appears to retain some of its marginal characteristics" ("Marked Difference" 285). Adams attempts to prove the continued association of tattooing with deviance not by investigating society's attitude towards tattoos, but by investigating the extent to which tattooing has become a mainstream practice. For this investigation, Adams performs secondary analysis on data<sup>9</sup> collected via a telephone survey by the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University. Five hundred people (ranging in age from 18 to 50 years and living in the contiguous United States) were selected using random digit dialing to ensure that every individual within the population had an equal probability of being selected (Adams "Marked Difference" 277).<sup>10</sup> Using a random selection method allows researchers to test their hypothesis among a sample that is representative of the population. The results, therefore, appear more applicable to the population as a whole. Adams differentiates between his research methods and those of sociologists in the past claiming that his data comes "from a nationally representative dataset" whereas prior sociological work on tattooing typically used "institutionalized populations, or more commonly, college students" (Adams "Marked Difference" 269).

Indeed, prior sociological work on tattooing has been criticized for exhibiting biased selection methods. Associations between tattooing, criminality, and insanity may have resulted from how sociological studies framed the topic. Sociologist Mary Kosut claims that researchers from 1960 to 1990 exhibited bias in selecting sample populations. She states, "One characteristic these articles share is their unsound methodological practices and the subjective biases of the researchers. For example, some

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<sup>9</sup>The data, collected between February and April of 2004, was originally used for health-oriented research studying the prevalence of tattooing in the United States and corresponding medical consequences (Adams "Marked Difference" 277).

<sup>10</sup>Note: The sample fails to be 100% representative of the population due to the polling method employed. Not every person living in the United States has a registered telephone. The study excludes those individuals that do not own a phone or those who rely solely on cell phones.

focus exclusively on tattooed male psychiatric patients imprisoned within state hospitals and prisons” (Kosut “Mad Artists” 81). These biases have framed tattooing as “a potential indicator, or symptom, of a mental health problem” (Adams “Bodies of Change” 106). Analysis of prior sociological work on tattooing and the subsequent discovery of methodological errors such as selection biases have further propelled researchers today to investigate the phenomenon deeper and to develop new methods to study society’s perception of tattoos.

While prior sociological work on tattooing mainly consisted of qualitative data, Adams seeks to measure the extent to which tattooing has become mainstream using quantitative data. Adams develops several hypotheses that together form a measure of tattooing’s marginality. Of particular relevance are the hypotheses that examine whether or not tattooing has transcended age, gender and socio-economic lines. These hypotheses are:

- “H1: Higher educational attainment will be positively related to having a tattoo in the contemporary era.
- H2: Higher income levels will be positively related to having a tattoo in the contemporary era.
- H3: Age will be negatively related to having a tattoo. [...]
- H4: There should no longer be a significant relationship between gender and whether one has a tattoo” (Adams “Marked Difference” 276).

Adams’ results show that tattooing has in fact overcome some of the barriers it has faced in the past. However, the continued presence of other barriers prevents tattooing from receiving full social acceptance. Of the above hypotheses tested, the one testing the relationship between an individual’s gender and having a tattoo was supported. Adams found that males and females had tattoos in similar numbers (“Marked Difference” 279). Through its history in the United States, tattooing has existed as primarily a masculine practice. Tattooed women in the circus were extremely successful not only because displaying their tattoos sometimes required them to expose their legs and thighs (an act considered racy during the Victorian era) but also because tattoos until that time had only been seen on

men (DeMello 58). Tattooed women truly were an “oddy” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Adams argues that “the declining relevance of gender to whether one has a tattoo seems to be indicative of both its growth as a practice and the weakening of normative prohibitions against tattooing” (“Marked Difference” 286). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tattooing was thought to be such a vile practice that it was thought to corrupt the purity of women. Society’s general acceptance of tattooed females today suggests a departure from a perception of repugnance.

Though tattooing seems to have broken through gender barriers, tattooing has not seen widespread acceptance across socio-economic levels. Adams found that his hypothesis that suggested a positive relationship between an individual’s level of education and having a tattoo was not substantiated by the data. Prevalence among the highly educated, Adams argued, would indicate that society no longer perceived the acquisition of tattoos as an irresponsible or rash decision. However, as Figure 12 indicates, the percentages of individuals who have tattoos as compared to those who do not have tattoos decreases as an individual’s level of education increases. Similarly, there is a negative relationship between an individual’s income level and having a tattoo. In general, individuals who have higher incomes are less likely to have a tattoo than individuals who have lower incomes. Collectively, the results from these two hypotheses suggest that tattooing remains more popular among the lower classes than the upper classes. Therefore, it would seem that tattooing today remains on the outskirts of society and that the aversion from tattoos by the upper class indicates a continued association with uncivilized or unrefined behaviors. However, Adams points out that the trend may be better explained by “normative expectations” in the workplace (“Marked Difference” 285). Individuals’ educational level often correlates to their “anticipated career trajectory” (Adams “Marked Difference” 285). Typically jobs at the middle and high income levels prohibit employees from having tattoos. Therefore, those who wish to enter into a moderate- to high-paying career – typically those who have attained a higher level of education – would abstain from acquiring a tattoo to maximize their employability. Tattoos as a



potential “occupational constraint” still indicates a degree of its stigmatization in society. The fact that tattooing has failed to cross over into the professional world implies that tattoos are considered aesthetically offensive or indicative of unprofessionalism.

The negative relationship that exists between age and having a tattoo best exemplifies the complexity of tattooing’s existence in today’s society. Adams found that tattoos were much more prevalent among individuals of younger generations than they were among individuals of older generations. This finding illustrates both tattooing’s growing popularity and its failure to gain full social acceptance. Indeed, tattooing has become increasingly prevalent since its advancement during the tattoo renaissance. Yet this growing popularity appears to have only occurred among the youth. Youth have always been considered the vehicles through which social and cultural change take place. The tattooing phenomenon has employed the youth to expand its acceptance as well. The commodification of tattooing has been primarily focused on a younger audience with the media emphasizing tattoo’s inherent coolness and association with rebellion. Rebellion, despite typically interpreted as being negative, appeals to the younger generations who seek to break free from authoritative figures. Older generations’ general aversion to tattooing can be explained by their retention of traditional characterizations of tattooing. When individuals of the older generations were the same age as today’s youth, tattooing was instinctively perceived as a deviant practice. Unlike today, deviance in those days was neither desired nor accepted in society. Sociologist Mary Kosut argues that the perception of tattoos shared by older generations has suppressed tattooing from ever attaining social acceptance. She states, “Unlike other aesthetic-cultural forms that made the transition from marginality to mainstream legitimacy, such as jazz, folk art and photography, tattooing has been uniquely beleaguered by a long-established and powerful public aversion to the practice” (Kosut “Mad Artists” 90). Therefore, the capacity of today’s youth to be more tolerant and accepting of cultural change than preceding

generations has not been enough to overcome the negativity surrounding the practice throughout its history.

## Conclusion

People make judgments because they need to make sense of their world. Tattooing did not make sense to the European explorers who discovered the practice among Pacific Islanders. Society therefore needed to construct a perception in order to justify the “absurd” practice. With its religious background and social conservatism acting as influences, European society adopted the perception that tattooing was an act of “primitiveness” – a practice only uncivilized people performed. Yet tattooing’s exoticism lured many Europeans to engage in the very practice that society scorned. Monarchs, upperclassman and circus and sideshow performers in Europe and in American eagerly acquired tattoos. Participation by the elite temporarily elevated society’s opinion of tattooing. However, the burgeoning entertainment industry caused perceptions of tattoos to regress. The display of heavily-tattooed freakish-looking people lessened tattooing’s appeal to mainstream society while simultaneously attracting marginalized individuals to tattooing’s eccentrics and lucrative benefits. Association with an exclusive and eccentric social group sentenced tattooing to marginality. In the years preceding circus’s heyday, tattoos as a unifying ritual shifted from one marginalized sub-cultural group to another and increasingly became associated with deviance. Deviance evolved into self-expression with the help of counter-culture revolutionists in the sixties and seventies. Today tattooing has become so prevalent despite its retention of marginal characteristics that society is being forced to develop a new perhaps conflicted perception of tattooing. The media, consumerism, and a rebellious youth have attempted to paint an image of tattooing as a pro-social and self-expressive art form applicable to every member of society. Yet as quickly as judgments are made, they are not quickly forgotten. Modern society has been unable to grant tattooing acceptance because of its long history of stigmatization.



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## Figure Credits

### Figure 2

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### Figure 6

(a) United States Patent Office. "Tattoo Machine Patent Document." Image. *United States Patent and Trademark Office*. 8 Dec. 1981. 16 Nov. 2009.

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Figure 7

1. "Artoria." Photo. *Circo da Tatuagem*. 29 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.originaltattoostudio.com>>.
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Figure 8

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Figure 9

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Figure 10

“Barbie® Totally Stylin’Tattoos™ Doll.” Product image. *Mattel, Inc.* 2009. 31 Oct. 2009. < <http://shop.mattel.com>>.

“Two Girls Playing With Barbie®.” Product image. *Mattel, Inc.* 2009. 31 Oct. 2009. < <http://shop.mattel.com>>.

Figure 11

1. Gifford, Amy. “Rush®.” Image in “Selling on Skin - The Best of Tattoo Advertising.” *Inventor Spot*. 2009. 12 Nov. 2009. < [http://inventorspot.com/articles/skin\\_tattoos\\_best\\_ads\\_7495](http://inventorspot.com/articles/skin_tattoos_best_ads_7495)>.
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