
TATTOOING AMONGST YOUTH IN BLOEMFONTEIN: SKIN-DEEP COMMUNICATIVE SIGNS OF A MINORITY GROUP?

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Communitas
ISSN 1023-0556
2014 19: 192-214

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a research project that was undertaken to determine both the scope and communicative value of tattoos mainly among students of the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The owner of the tattoo shop on the Bloemfontein Campus of the UFS was interviewed, while clients of the tattoo shop as well as undergraduate Communication Science students, a larger random group of students and young working adults of the same age completed a questionnaire anonymously. The expectations were that tattoos among the four groups mentioned (i) would not be predominantly culturally determined, nor (ii) visible all the time; nor (iii) chosen specifically to communicate a rebellious message. In a follow-up study on the same campus, Communication Science students requested fellow students to complete a slightly adapted questionnaire as part of a class assignment. The findings of the analysis are evaluated in terms of both incremental and entity theories, against the background of a brief history of tattoos as a means of expressing identity. This study contributes to the understanding of the role tattoos play in expressing the identities of communities. The findings indicate that the participants choose tattoos for different reasons than a few decades ago in other parts of the world. It can also be concluded that tattoos are by no means skin-deep communicative signs. Given that the majority of respondents have tattoos, the tattoos cannot be considered the signs of a minority group.

Keywords: identity, expressing identity, communication, tattoo, communicative value, messages, incremental theory, entity theory

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INTRODUCTION

As a lecturer on the Bloemfontein Campus of the University of the Free State, one cannot help but notice the popularity of tattoos among the students. An act previously frowned upon by society and mostly reserved for men (Vanston 2008: 1) is gaining popularity among university students. Moreover, it is not limited to a certain group of students or a specific race or gender - ink on skin is popular among a wide spectrum of university students.

The question thus arises as to what has caused this shift in thought. What drives this trend? What are university students trying to communicate with their tattoos? Is it a fashion statement only? Unlike fashion, which is fleeting and changes with the dawn of each new season, ink on skin is permanent and fixed, and cannot be erased and discarded at will. It is permanent and once applied by a tattoo artist becomes part of the tattooed individual.

This article reports on a research project that was undertaken to determine firstly both the scope and communicative value of tattoos especially among students of the University of the Free State. The project follows on international research in this respect to establish the situation in South Africa among students and young adults in Bloemfontein. For Fisher (2002: 91), American tattooing remained on the margins of society and could be perceived as part of a deviant subculture and “not a topic of serious intellectual interest”. In 2007, Aguilar, in contrast, predicted that with the increase in tattoos by celebrity and professional sports heroes, the trend in tattoo communication and the whole idea of tattoos would continue to permeate societies throughout the world and “may soon be the dominant ideology” (Aguilar 2007: 19).

There appears to be a revival in the popularity of tattoos on the Bloemfontein Campus of the University of the Free State. Celebrities and sport stars flaunt theirs and reality television programmes concerned with tattoos are popular. Young people follow trends, admire celebrities, and are influenced by images in the popular media.

THE ART OF TATTOOS: THEN AND NOW

The fact that tattoos gained popularity in the recent past is a given in our postmodern society. Though it was an act frowned upon in our recent past, it is now trending and is less of an act of defiance. Many celebrities, including popular sport stars (David Beckham, Francois Hougaardt, Dale Steyn), actresses (Angelina Jolie) and actors (Johnny Depp), musicians (P.Diddy, Kanye West, Rihanna) and reality television stars (Snooky), adore their body art. Television programmes such as *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink* and even *Tattoo Hunter* are popular, while bookstores carry a range of books on the subject. Throughout the history of tattoos a rhythmic

ebb and flow in its popularity indicates that it is a multifaceted phenomenon not limited in its meaning.

Various sources (Kerner 2013; Anon. 2010; DeMello 2000; Steward 1990) begin the overview of the history of tattoos at different moments in history. What is clear from the literature is that the history of tattoos is ancient and that the motivations for tattoos are as varied as the peoples of the world. For the purposes of this article, a brief overview of its history will be presented to provide some context to this research.

Hambly (in Steward 1990: 183) presents evidence of archeologists that indicate that the history of tattoos can be traced back to 12 000 B.C. as excavations of bodies from the Stone Age bore bone-deep patterned cuttings identified as primitive tattoos. Ötzi the Iceman's preserved body (Kerner 2013: 38), which is around 5300 years old, has been tattooed in simple patterns using carbon. Researchers suggest that his tattoos could have served a medicinal purpose (Kerner 2013: 38).

Tattooing as it is presently known, whereby ink is inserted underneath the surface of the skin, is an Egyptian practice and can be traced back to between 4000 and 2000 B.C. (Steward 1990: 184). Kerner (2013: 39) states that it was mostly practiced among females and evidence suggests that it was seen as erotic and it signified fertility.

From Egypt, this practice spread to Greece, Persia, Arabia, and Crete, and by 2000 B.C. it had found its way through southern Asia to the Ainus people, who crossed the ocean and occupied present-day Japan from where it spread to Burma and continued spreading to the Phillipines, Borneo, Formosa, and the South Sea Islands around 1200 B.C. (Steward 1990: 184). For the Ainus people, tattooing had magical powers, and for the Burmese people it served both magical and religious functions. The Polynesians, who inhabited many of the South Sea Islands, eventually reached New Zealand where until today the "Moko" style of tattooing forms an important part of the traditional culture and is significant in religious rituals and taboos. The origin of the word "tattoo" can be traced back to the Polynesians and the Tahitians: in Polynesian the word "ta" means to strike something and "tatau" in Tahitian can be translated as marking something (Anon. 2010; DeMello 2000; Steward 1990: 184).

Evidence suggests that the practice of tattooing not only spread southwards from Egypt to eventually reach New Zealand, but that it also spread from Egypt northwards to Europe. Archeological finds bear testament to the popularity of tattooing among the Iberians who preceded the Celts of Ireland, the Picts of Scotland, the Gauls from France, as well as the Teutonic races who invaded the British Isles and Scotland. The Danes, Saxons and Norsemen invaded the British Isles and adopted the custom of tattooing (Steward 1990: 185).

Tattooing then spread further to the west and became widely practiced during the Greek wars (*ibid.*). In Greece, it was common practice to mark criminals or slaves with tattoos (Jones 2000: 13), but the Romans marked only their slaves with tattoos (Steward 1990:186). The ancient Greeks called tattoos “stigmata” (Rapp 2010: 1; Jones 2000: 4); throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, the practice of marking criminals with tattoos (“stigmata”) prevailed and therefore the negative associations with tattoos endured (Fisher 2002: 93).

Caplan (2000: xvi), however, points to research that reveals that this stigmatising use was inverted when tattooing was used by early Christians in Roman areas as well as by some Celtic Christians, pilgrims and medieval monks as a voluntary and honourable token of their servitude to Christ. This practice came to a halt in 787 A.D. when Pope Hadrian I banned this “barbarous practice”; yet, despite this decree, tattooing survived in Britain and a number of early Anglo-Saxon kings were tattooed, one of which was King Harold II, killed at the Battle of Hastings (1066), who had his wife’s name tattooed above his heart (Steward 1990:187). With the spread and rise in popularity of Christianity, the practice of tattooing began losing its allure.

Captain James Cook (Cesare 2011: 4; Fisher 2002: 92; Steward 1990: 188) reintroduced the art of tattooing to Europe. He called it “tattaw”, derived from the Tahitian “ta”, which can be translated as “knock” or “strike” (as previously mentioned). Men from Captain Cook’s crew returned home from their voyages sporting exotic tattoos. Captain Cook also took tattooed people from the South Sea Islands onboard to exhibit them in Europe (Cesare 2011: 4; Steward 1990: 188). Mainly because of Captain Cook’s voyages, Europeans started viewing the practice of tattooing as a form of cultural exchange (Cesare 2011: 4) and by the 19th century tattooing became popular (and voluntary) in France and Italy (Fisher 2002: 94). It was during the same period that “fashionable society” in both England and the United States experienced a tattoo craze (Fisher 2002: 94). What further contributed to tattooing anchoring itself firmly in American culture was the Civil War (1861-1865): during this War the art of tattooing became popular among soldiers on both sides (Fisher 2002: 93).

By 1891, Samuel O’Reily invented the first electric tattoo machine (Sanders, in Cesare 2011: 5) which made tattooing more accessible to a broader public. An unforeseen outcome of this invention was the spread of disease; soon negative media coverage and waning interest by the upper class led to the dwindling popularity of tattoos, so much so that by the mid 20th century tattoos were seen as an unsavoury and deviant act (*ibid.*). During World War II, tattoos became popular among soldiers, but because of the health risks associated with tattoos, the military began prohibiting it (Fisher 2002: 96). During the years after World War II, tattoos were associated with drunks, gangs and the working class (Govenar 2000: 230).

The American “Return to Normalcy” movement gained momentum during the 1950s and it was during this time that tattoos became the symbol of rebelliousness, while popular culture characters such as the Marlboro Man and Popeye showed off their ink (Govenar 2000: 230).

According to Cesare (2011: 5), the “tattoo renaissance” began in the late 1960s and by the late seventies, with the emergence of “New Social Movements” (NSMs) which aimed to address issues such as gay rights, environmentalism and feminism, it gained further momentum. The hippie and rock star subcultures also assisted in popularising tattooing once again (Fisher 2002: 97).

The tattoo revolution can be seen as the result of the desire by individuals for stability in an ever-changing, postmodern society (cf. Bergh & Lombard i.p.; Cesare 2011). According to Velliquette (in Cesare 2011: 6), there is a correlation between the increase in social change and the increased popularity of tattooing. An act once seen as the hallmark of the subcultures on the fringes of society has now become mainstream and crosses all boundaries (Newman 2012: 5). Statistics from the Harris Poll as quoted by Aguilar (2007: 2) indicated that by 2003, 16 percent of American adults between the ages of 25 and 29 had at least one tattoo; according to research by Cesare (2011: 3) one in five adults in America had been inked by 2011.

South African statistics on tattooing are not available, but from the research for this article it is clear that it is popular in Bloemfontein.

FUNCTIONS OF THE CURRENT TATTOO

It is all good and well that the art of tattooing is enjoying an upsurge, but what function does it serve, if any?

According to Turner (in Rapp 2010: 4), “in pre-modern societies the body is an important surface on which the marks of social status, family position, tribal affiliation, age, gender and religious condition can easily and publicly be displayed”. Marczak (2007: 39) states that the functions of tattoos throughout history are so varied that it cannot be summed up in one exclusive list. Some of its functions throughout history include but is not limited to (Marczak 2007: 39-40) rites of passage, mourning the dead, decoration, protection, to harness magical powers, membership, defiance of social norms, healing the mind/body split, punishment, recording important life events, and initiation into adulthood. Tattoos applied onto the surface of the body thus functioned in pre-modern societies to convey such messages, but considering present day tattoos, would they have the same functions?

Referring to the research undertaken by Marszak (2007: 40-41) it is evident that in many cultures in the South Sea Islands, tattooing still plays an important cultural

role and functions as initiation practice into adulthood, an important traditional ritual. Although such traditional rituals have largely been lost with modernisation, both Blanchard (1994) and Sanders (1989) state that a tattoo can function as a ritual. In a modernised society with precious few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can function as a reminder of a life event.

Mercury (in Marczak 2007: 41) opines that one of the functions of the modern tattoo is healing the mind/body split:

[T]he advent of cyberspace has created a rootless, placeless society, accessed by the seated and thinking. One's place is nowhere or anywhere... the physical body never interacts with anyone. A result of this statelessness is psychic and physical numbness. Tattooing, piercing, implanting, and branding are means of jump-starting sense functioning that has lost its capacity for feeling.

Identification and proclaiming group membership are much quoted reasons for obtaining a tattoo today (Marczak 2007: 40; Blanchard 1994; Sanders 1989). By applying established symbols on the body, the tattooee can claim group membership - which is a very powerful message due to the permanence of a tattoo (*ibid.*). As much as tattoos can identify an individual and proclaim group membership, it can also exclude the tattooee from certain professions, and even though a huge shift in thought regarding tattoos and stigmatisation took place in the recent past, tattoos can still be seen as an act of defiance, and those wearing it as different from others (Marczak 2007: 40-41). Porcella (2009: vi) quotes Atkinson who states that tattoos can unite the individual with a subculture, but simultaneously separate him/her from society, thus being both "symbols of exclusion and of inclusion".

In addition, a tattoo can serve as protection for its wearer, it can be a protective symbol or talisman (Blanchard 1994; Sanders 1989), a belief held very strongly among Burmese and ancient peoples from Central Asia where tattoos were seen as magical, protective and something that could increase the tattooee's powers (Marczak 2007: 40-41). These beliefs remain popular among Pagan and Wiccan wearers in the Western world who carefully select symbols with magical qualities to be tattooed on their skin (*ibid.*).

In Western society, tattoos often function to decorate; both sexes hope to attract attention which might increase the wearer's popularity. According to Marczak (*ibid.*), this might be a reason for tattoos' popularity among Western youth. Sweetnam (1999) opines that tattoos are of greater value because of the pain involved in obtaining a tattoo, as well as its permanence. Blanchard (1994) and Sanders (1989) both stress that regardless of their particular psychosocial function for the individual, tattoos are images (even words become images as/within tattoos) and by modifying the body with tattoos, the individual has chosen to add

permanent decoration to his/her body.

Having this decorative function, tattoos are often associated with exhibitionism. Although there is an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing the tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual's stylishness, identifying a group to which he/she belongs, and demonstrating an individual's rebelliousness. The desire to conceal can stem from the deeply personal meaning of the tattoo for the individual or from the deeply embedded social stigma. While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from his/her peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reaction they receive from others, especially when this reaction is from friends or family (Blanchard 1994; Sanders 1989).

From this discussion one can deduce that despite the various functions that a tattoo might serve or the varied meanings attached to it, the underlying function of tattoos is to communicate and to create meaning. It is also a given that the tattooed person's intended message with the tattoo might differ from the meaning understood by the onlooker. Pitts (2003) supports this idea and writes that the meaning of the tattoo is left to the interpretation of a stranger.

The fact remains that although the tattooee's control over the interpretation of the tattoo is limited, the tattoo as a form of nonverbal communication communicates to all who see it.

AMBIGUITIES REGARDING TATTOOS

"A picture is worth a thousand words" might very well apply to the communicative function of tattoos. Tattoos have been described as a relevant form of nonverbal communication (Aguilar 2007: 2), "scars that speak and yet demand no reply: assertions of what is, frozen in the flesh" (Benson 2000: 237). A number of authors (Wymann 2010; Doss & Hubbard 2009; Doss 2005; Atkinson 2004; Pitts 2003) reiterate that tattoos have communicative value. Thus, tattoos as a form of nonverbal communication will communicate and will be interpreted by others who see them.

Fisher (2002: 101) states that even as tattooing becomes more prevalent in America, there remains a persistent taboo on tattoos. In general it seems that people with tattoos often feel that they should cover their body markings in public (especially in job situations) to avoid social or professional rejection. Pitts (2003: 79) agrees that people with tattoos will often hide them because they want to control the meaning of them: by controlling who gets to see the tattoo gives the tattooee the chance to control the flow of information.

Caplan (2000) emphasises the complexity and ambiguity involved in the history and practice of tattooing. Often getting a tattoo is not a deliberated decision

(Fisher 2002: 100). Several authors (cf. Fisher 2002) compare the decision to be tattooed with impulse shopping (in a group). In this regard, Fisher (2002: 100) explains some tattoo clients do not research the process of tattooing or the reputation or skill of the tattoo artist, and that linking impulsiveness with tattooing creates a fascinating tension for tattoos are, by definition, permanent. The choice of tattooist and design should, therefore, be a process rather than a capricious act. This impulsiveness can mean that the individual does not receive a well-designed tattoo, but in spite of the spontaneity of the act, the tattoo generally conveys multiple meanings for its bearer.

The ambiguity thus lies in the fact that something which might be seen as a fashion fad has permanence, and the ambiguity in meaning lies in the fact that the intended meaning of the tattooee may differ from the interpreted message.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research question

The preceding discussing sketched the situation regarding tattoos in the United States. What is the situation regarding tattoos among South African students, and especially University of the Free State (UFS) students?

Research objectives

This research project was undertaken to determine both the scope and communicative value of tattoos especially among students of the UFS.

A secondary objective was to use this exploratory study to extrapolate a conceptual framework as an explanatory tool that would facilitate further research in this regard.

Research strategy, methodology and expectations

In order to study the frequencies of occurrence in a linguistic corpus (cf. Stefanowitsch 2010: 1; Biber, Conrad & Reppen 2000), the owner of the tattoo shop on the Bloemfontein Campus of the UFS was interviewed in 2010; and clients of the tattoo shop, as well as undergraduate Communication Science students, a larger random group and young working adults of the same age completed a questionnaire anonymously in 2012. The questionnaire was adapted for the local setting from one used in international research and was available in Afrikaans and English. In a follow-up exercise in 2013, third-year Communication Science students requested fellow students from other departments to complete a slightly adapted questionnaire.

The expectations were that (i) tattoos among the four groups discussed would not be predominantly culturally determined, that (ii) tattoos among these four groups

would not be visible all the time and, (iii) tattoos among these four groups would not be chosen specifically to communicate a rebellious message.

Although it is anticipated that the research project will ultimately include students on several campuses throughout South Africa, this study focused on students in Bloemfontein. Their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years, in other words Generation Y (born between 1982-1999). Characteristics of this generation vary by region, but this group is generally marked by an increased use and familiarity with communication, media and digital technologies, and being brought up with a neoliberal approach to politics and economics.

RESULTS 2012

The exposition below represents the results obtained by means of questionnaires completed by the two student groups as well as the young, working adults.

Students registered in the Department of Communication Science

In the next few tables, the findings of the questionnaires distributed amongst a group of students registered as students in the Department of Communication Science will be provided.

Number of tattoos

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF TATTOOS

Number of tattoos	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Frequency (respondents)	3	13	17	9	2	1	1	0

The majority of respondents had two tattoos each. Three respondents did not have tattoos, of which two are planning to have a tattoo done in future. Thirty respondents who have tattoos are planning to get more done in future, while 14 indicated that they are not planning to have any more tattoos done.

Age

The majority of respondents had their tattoos done when they were 20 years old (n=17). One respondent indicated that he was 11 years old when he had his first tattoo (a gang tattoo) done. The majority of the respondents were 21 years old (n=23).

TABLE 2: AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

Age	<18	18-19	20-21	22-23	24-25	>25
Frequency (respondents)	0	3	23	10	8	2
First tattoo	10	14	17	3	0	0

Visibility and parents

The researchers asked the respondents by way of the questionnaire to indicate whether or not their tattoos are visible to onlookers or not, and whether the respondents' parents had any tattoos.

TABLE 3: VISIBILITY OF TATTOOS AND PARENTS WITH/ WITHOUT TATTOOS

	Yes	No
Tattoos visible	29	17
Parents	4	42

Gender and religious affiliation

TABLE 4: GENDER AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Gender	Male		Female
Number of respondents	12		34
Religious affiliation	Christian	Other	None
Number of respondents	41	0	5

It is worth noting that 41 respondents proclaimed themselves to be Christian, while five respondents indicated that they were not interested in religion.

The members of this group of students were all from the Department of Communication Science; the majority of students with tattoos study Corporate and Marketing Communication, as captured below.

TABLE 5: FIELDS OF STUDY RELATED TO NUMBER OF TATTOOS

Corporate and Marketing Communication	Communication Science	Media Studies and Journalism
23	7	16

The students’ reasons for having a tattoo are summarised in Table 6 below. The categories were not specified as choices, but followed and were systemised from the respondents’ answers.

TABLE 6: PRIMARY REASON FOR THE TATTOO

Enjoyed the pain	2
No reason	3
Fun, cute, just wanted to do it	8
To feel young again	2
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	14
Uniqueness, self-expression	3
For attention	1
Peer pressure, influenced by others	6
Like the designs, body art, decorations	5
Personal	1
Seems interesting	1

The following comments by some of the participants drew the researchers’ attention:

“I enjoy the pain, which is weird.”

“I wanted to feel young and alive again.” (The respondent is 22 years old)

“Dit vertel ’n storie van verlede en van alles wat al met my gebeur het.”

(English translation: *It tells a story of the past and of everything that has happened to me.*)

“A tattoo is a way of expressing yourself and your way of thinking. It (the tattoo) has to be something meaningful to you.”

“Nonverbal communication – I love to express myself through art.”

“My first reason for getting tattoo is because I love attention, one more thing is because I enjoy decorating my body, I think tattoos make attractive body.”

Students registered for other courses

In the next few tables, the findings of questionnaires distributed amongst students registered for different degree courses, excluding students from the Department of Communication Science, are presented.

Number of tattoos

TABLE 7: NUMBER OF TATTOOS

Number of tattoos	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	>7
Frequency (respondents)	25	57	19	14	3	1	1	1	11 (2), 12 (1) 15 (1) 35+ (1)

The majority of respondents had one tattoo each. The majority of respondents planned to have more tattoos in future, as revealed in Table 8:

TABLE 8: PLANNING MORE TATTOOS

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	>7
-	37	13	13	1	1	1	1	4

Age

The majority of respondents had their tattoos done when they were 18 to 19 years old. The majority of the respondents were 20 to 21 years old.

TABLE 9: AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

Age	<18	18-19	20-21	22-23	24-25	>25
Currently	4	15	42	40	17	26 (3) 27 (1) 28 (4) 31 (1)
First tattoo	23	39	22	5	-	27 (3)

Visibility and parents

**TABLE 10: VISIBILITY OF TATTOOS AND PARENTS WITH/
WITHOUT TATTOOS**

	Yes	No
Tattoos visible	71	29
Parents	1 (4) 2 (2) 3 (2) 4 (1)	106

Gender and religious affiliation

It is once again noteworthy that 92 respondents proclaimed themselves to be Christian, while 20 respondents indicated apathy regarding religion.

TABLE 11: GENDER AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Gender	Male		Female	
Number	57		65	
Religious affiliation	Christian	Other		None
Number	92	Anglican (4) Roman Catholic (4) Rastafarian Spiritual Jeki		20

Students' main reasons for having tattoos were organised in the same way as for the previous group:

TABLE 12: PRIMARY REASON FOR THE TATTOO

Enjoyed the pain	1
No reason	0
Fun, cute, just wanted to do it	18
To feel young again	2
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	45
Uniqueness, self-expression	10
For attention	5

Peer pressure, influenced by others	23
Like the designs, body art, decorations	20
Personal	3
Seems interesting	3
Fashion	2
Addictive	1
Relieves stress	3
For improved self-esteem	2
Rebelled	5

The following comments by students stood out:

“Getting tattoos is generally the prerequisite for being cool. However, my first tattoo was a gang tattoo.”

“I just wanted to know what it felt like to have a tattoo drawn on my body, it was just a cool thing for me.”

“Expression of independence, and having the one thing I love the most, closest to me.”

“’n Tattoo is iets waarmee ek myself kan assosieer, ’n klein weerkaatsing van myself.”

(English translation: *A tattoo is something that I can associate with, a small reflection of myself.*)

“I got a tattoo to boost my image. When I was growing up I wasn’t a very popular person at school and so I had very low self-esteem so this tattoo helped me in many more ways than one.”

“I enjoy expressing myself through my body.”

One student gave reasons for not getting a tattoo:

“It makes people to fear and disrespect you. I think for some jobs tattoos are not allowed. I also think that the body is the temple of God and that it should be respected and honoured.”

Other young people

In the next few tables, the findings of questionnaires from young people who are not studying and who are mostly employed will be reflected. These participants were on campus on a specific day in 2012. This group is included in the preliminary study by way of comparison.

Number of tattoos

TABLE 13: NUMBER OF TATTOOS

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	>7
3	4	5	3	3	1	-	-	8 (1) 10 (1) +24 (1)

The majority of respondents had two tattoos each. The majority of respondents planned to have more tattoos in future, as revealed in the following table:

TABLE 14: PLANNING MORE TATTOOS

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	>7
-	3	3	2	3	1	-	-	-

Age

The majority of respondents had their tattoos done before or when they were 18 to 19 years old. The majority of the respondents were 22 to 23 years old.

TABLE 15: AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

Age	<18	18-19	20-21	22-23	24-25	>25
Currently	-	1	5	11	6	-
First tattoo	7	7	3	-	-	-

Visibility and parents

None of the parents of the young people in this group had tattoos.

**TABLE 16: VISIBILITY OF TATTOOS AND PARENTS WITH/
WITHOUT TATTOOS**

	Yes	No
Tattoos visible	13	5
Parents	0	20

Gender and religion

TABLE 17: GENDER AND RELIGION OF PARTICIPANTS

Gender		Male		Female
Number		9		13
Religious affiliation	Christian	Other		None
Number	14	Rastafarian		7

The main reasons for tattoos were categorised in the same way as for the previous two groups:

TABLE 18: PRIMARY REASON FOR TATTOO

Enjoyed the pain	0
No reason	2
Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it	4
To feel young again	0
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	7
Uniqueness, self-expression	1
For attention	0
Peer pressure, influenced by others	2
Like the designs, body art, decorations	5
Personal	1
Seems interesting	0
Fashion	1
Addictive	0
Relieves stress	0
For improved self-esteem	0
Rebelled	0

The following comments by participants in this group were telling:

“My body is a canvas and I like to show through my outer body art who I am inside as an artist.”

“I love art, when I discovered body art I thought it was the most exotic thing. The designs are based on things I love most, which are fairies.”

RESULTS 2013

As the researchers were interested primarily in the reasons for having tattoos and communicative value in terms of this group, the focus is on these aspects. The questionnaire distributed to this group formed part of a third-year Communication Science assignment in which the students also had to write an essay on tattoos. The questionnaire included two additional questions, namely, “May we take a picture of your tattoo to attach to the questionnaire?” and “What did the tattoo cost you in South African Rand?”. The first of these two questions was included to fathom respondents’ communicative intent and mode more accurately. Very few participants answered this question. A few answered yes and several no. Among the latter group especially there were participants who indicated that they would be willing to participate in a confidential interview.

In most cases only one tattoo (out of two or three) was visible. As indicated previously, most respondents with tattoos were planning more for the future. The patterns concerning the reasons for having a tattoo correspond with those of the previous groups, though – as is reflected in table 19 – one new reason for a tattoo was “hiding a scar”. A new category, permanence, emerged from this group as a reason for having a tattoo.

The following represent some of the participants’ reasons:

“It belongs to you and no one else.”

“My tattoos are a reminder of where I’ve been and where I want to go.”

“Memorabilia, it is moments captured and painted onto the canvas of my life. My tattoos will live on in the intentions of the universe.”

“Some things you can’t say in words, your body will say it for you. My tattoos were and still are a journey, only I mapped it out for myself.”

TABLE 19: PRIMARY REASON FOR TATTOO

Enjoyed the pain	2
No reason	9
Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it	99
To feel young again	0
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	184
Uniqueness, self-expression	60
For attention	16
Peer pressure, influenced by others	52
Like the designs, body art, decorations	60

Personal	11
Seems interesting	6
Fashion	11
Addictive	4
Relieves stress	2
For improved self-esteem	3
Rebelled	3
Permanence	15

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The findings are in line with the researchers' expectations in that the tattoos counted were not predominantly culturally determined (and also not by tradition, given the few parents with tattoos); the majority were visible all the time, but many were not; and very few tattoos were chosen to communicate a rebellious message.

In the initial stages of the project in 2010, the owner of the tattoo shop pointed out that many clients have tattoos for the sake of the pain. According to this study's findings that strong trend has now subsided.

Across all three 2012 groups, as well as the 2013 group, the category *meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* represented the strongest reason for having a tattoo. The three other categories that came out strongly were *like the designs, body art, decorations; fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it*; and *peer pressure, influenced by others*. The category *uniqueness, self-expression* also featured strongly in the 2013 results.

At present then, young people on the Bloemfontein Campus of the University of the Free State choose tattoos for different reasons than a few decades ago in other parts of the world (cf. Cesare 2011; Fisher 2002). They are especially innovative in the way that Christian symbols are not only used, but celebrated. For instance, several of the respondents added something about nature and the appearance of their tattoo and that it has meaning as a Christian symbol. This is also in sharp contrast to what would be expected a few years ago, given the taboo on tattoos that prevailed in certain Christian circles then.

At first it appeared that sensory intelligence may offer a useful framework for analysis of the results. Theorists working in the field of sensory intelligence agree that sensory profiles differ from person to person. There is general agreement that persons with a high tolerance for touch will enjoy the touch of other persons or objects, while persons with a high tolerance for visual images will enjoy colours and decorations. From this it can be deduced that persons who enjoy "having a

tattoo” may have a high threshold for touch, as well as visual images. *Like the designs, body art, decorations* emerged as a strong category in this study, but since pain was no longer such a strong factor, this approach was not followed for this study.

The complexity of the study under discussion lies in an attempt to analyse the current results coherently, yet it is especially implicit self-theories (incremental theory and entity theory) that provide a clear analysis of the results so far.

The overall analytical approach is that of *branding* (naming a product or service in order to gain an identity, develop a meaning and project an image conducive to building brand equity for an organisation (cf. Jooste, Strydom, Berndt & Du Plessis 2009: 217; Clifton & Simmons 2003)), more specifically *personal branding* (the process whereby people and their careers are marked as brands (North 2010)). Following Park and John (2010) this study’s analytical approach (cf. Bergh, Lombard & Van Zyl 2013) can be represented by the following schema:

FIGURE 1: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK



The advantage of such an analysis is that it distinguishes two overall guiding approaches among respondents. Park and John (2010) explain that people who endorse incremental theory (incremental theorists) view their personal qualities as malleable, which they can improve through their own efforts. In contrast to this, those who endorse entity theory (entity theorists) believe that their personal qualities are fixed, and that they cannot improve them through their own direct efforts. In order to enhance the self, they seek out opportunities to signal their positive qualities to the self and others. The latter category would represent the two strongest groups in this study in terms of reasons for having a tattoo.

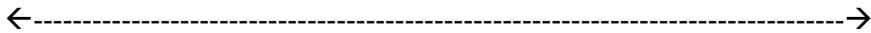
This study’s novel category *personal, personal branding* is motivated by the finding that tattoos among these students are not primarily and deliberately

used for professional or commercial branding in combination with the finding that *meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events; like the designs, body art, decorations; fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it; and peer pressure, influenced by others* represent the main reasons for having a tattoo among the said groups.

For the purpose of dealing with diversity and individuality in the use of tattoos in the groups examined and in view of generalisation, the researchers (cf. Bergh *et al.* 2013) posit the following continuum from an integrated marketing communication perspective (Jooste *et al.* 2009; Du Plessis, Bothma, Jordaan & Van Heerden 2003) in relation to the analytical framework above:

FIGURE 2: PERSONAL BRANDING CONTINUUM

Personal Marketing - Personal Public Relations - Personal Branding - Personal Personal Branding



CONCLUSION

As pointed out above, young people on the Bloemfontein Campus of the University of the Free State choose tattoos for different reasons than a few decades ago in other parts of the world. From the findings that indicate that the category *meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* represented the strongest reason for having a tattoo it can be concluded that tattoos are by no means skin-deep communicative signs. Given that the majority of respondents in all four groups discussed have tattoos, they are also not the signs of a minority group.

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