

Why We Tattoo? Exploring the Motivation and Meaning

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Abstract

It is difficult to understand why people would choose to have ink injected under their skin as this means taking themselves a mark that will last longer they remains on this earth. There can be multiple constructions and of them, very common preconception focuses on abnormal characteristics associated with tattooed people, even, historically in many places of the world, "tattoos" were regarded as sign of social marginalization for the lower socio-economic groups as well as for marking criminals. But with the large prevalence that has taken place over the last 20-30 years, it has become main-stream, particularly among young people to present and express their self. Over time it has crossed continents, cut across the class and gender lines, flowed between high and low cultural milieus. Though there are many scholarly articles on tattoo have been found concentrating on American and European context but there is a paucity of documentation from India. Present exploratory research is an attempt to understand motivational dimensions from the lived experiences of the tattooed people in the metropolitan city Kolkata. A qualitative approach was adopted using in-depth interviews. Overall evidences suggested that there are many perceptions prompted people to have "tattoo" ranges from art, individuality, spirituality, memories to affection, fashion, scar hiding, idealizing someone and sometimes even influenced from social media.

Keywords: Tattoo; Body modification; Perception; Motivations

Introduction

The practice of modifying one's body by marking it has been present from ancient times. And the evidences of tattoo practice are scattered worldwide. Here the question arise what made people think of marking their body? Tattoo in many indigenous community is a part of their culture and it is done on men, women and sometimes on the children too, but they signify a different meaning to the different members of the society. Tattoo is often associated with spirituality, power, and gender. Therefore, to trace back the necessity of marking the body could be possibly for gaining control over something through a symbol that is tattoo and it is done on the body as body is the only thing that we own, therefore the marks that are tattooed in the body is the symbol of owning something. In tribal community tattoos are done after puberty as the symbol of being sexually matured or sometime after achieving some certain ranks in the society in case of men, and often married women are marked by tattoo as a symbol of marriage.

For last two decades, perceptions of tattooing and tattoos have supposed undergone significant changes. These include changes within the tattoo industry as well as also perceived attitudes towards tattoos and tattooing within society. Tattooing which once being associated with non-mainstream groups has moved from relatively incomprehensible issue to a booming aspect of modern consumer culture that can be seen in terms of fashion [1] and popular culture [2-5]. Researchers have recognized the value and importance that individual motivations have in tattooing practices [3,6]. Stirn and Hinz [7] observed, however, that there are comparatively few studies that focus upon individuals' social background and motivations for body modifications. Atkinson [8] called tattooing "a contextual and negotiated signifier of identity". Individuals are enacting agency in electing to use time, spend money, and endure pain to obtain tattoos [9]. In a sense, pain is a way of earning a body modification [10]. Motivations may be generally classified into religious, cultural, or emotional categories, celebration, decoration or they may be more individualistic [11,12]. Young adults may utilize tattooing to build upon existing desires to be unique and stand out [13]. Alternately, they may be affected by peer pressure or wanting to fit in [6,7]. Atkinson [8] noted that one participant's tattoo had significance as a marker for an accomplishment, but was simultaneously intended

as a religious symbol, as well as a display of masculinity. People also obtain tattoos as connection to personal relationships [14]. In some cultures, tattoos are believed to provide protection [15,16]. Wohlrab et al. [17] research has attempted to connect personality traits with body modification. Tattoos have even been utilized in conjunction with breast reconstruction [18].

In present society where everything is so fast and forwarded, tattoo shapes one's identity in a bit different way and could be described as a form of self-expression. Tattoo carries a meaning, a story, which is very own and very individualistic. That's why a completely same image of a tattoo can carry a different meaning to its owner and sometime to viewers. Therefore, making something in our body permanently in the form of tattoo and the pain of having it shows one's commitment to it. Paper or an art hanging in the wall could be destroyed, but a tattoo is something that would be with that person till death, until and unless his body is being destroyed. People carry it with them every day, it becomes a part of their body, and it becomes the new skin, in which they are carrying a story and reflecting their identity and attaching their inner self with it.

Objectives

- Evaluate the effect of tattoo in one's life.
- Examine the motivations of being tattooed from individual points of view.
- Explore why people use tattoo as a form of self-expression.

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Methods

This study was conducted using multi-faceted qualitative approach including observation, interviews (formal, informal as well in-depth), photography, and literature reviews. Data was collected by administrating semi-structured questionnaires from individuals including both tattoo artists and tattoo owners covering both sexes of various age groups who were selected by using snowball sampling technique from Kolkata metropolitan. Primary data were transcribed 'word to word' and narrative analysis was used to gain an understanding on the role of motivation behind being tattooed in this study.

Results

People have their very own motivations for their tattoo, and different perceptions are attached with it. People are seen to be motivated something that they personally feel close, or by someone whom they idolize or sometime just because of fashion. By repeated reading of transcribed data several themes have been developed in support of different perceptions and motivations which are described below:

Personal tale

Motivations often come from people's personal belief. As mentioned by the participants it includes something that are very close to them which they have choose to get tattooed, to show the importance of it in their life. In the case of Individual A, she has a special place for coffee in her life as she thinks that coffee makes her come across from all the problems she had. Therefore, she wanted to get something that in her voice- I have decided to get the most important charger of my life as my tattoo, Coffee my best friend, the solution for every problem in my life. I used to feel less stressed and relaxed when having coffee. I get my confidence back. I thought having it as my tattoo is for the love I had for it, so this tattoo will off course make me feel better like coffee is always around me (Figure 1).

Surprisingly in the case of Individual B, who was crazy about her dog 'Leo', expressed her love in the way- the first time when I wished to get a tattoo for myself was when I adopted a pet. I got one Labrador, who brought enormous happiness to my life, when things were not pretty okay in my life.... She stated- Tattoo, to me, is a message that you would like to pass on. It should have a meaning. People can get their names, the names of their loved ones, or get a message tattooed. Likely, I would like to see the name of my pet, which is a dog, a fawn coloured Labrador, and his name is Leo... my tattoo clearly shows his name, with a mark of a paw (Figure 2).

The story of Individual C, after having few years of married life he decided to show his love for wife by tattoo her wife name in his hand. To him- this tattoo was a gift to my wife on her birthday. We are being married for 3 years. She means a lot to me. I have thought to gift this on her birthday though it hurts a little bit, but she is worth it (smiled) (Figure 3).

Motivations from social and electronic media

Findings shows there are some motivations mentioned by the participants are from media like any T.V. programs or other. According to Individual D, who has tattooed his name in Chinese letter, has got interested in tattoo from the English movies, in which he saw people having tattoo. It had driven him towards tattoo. I have been interested from English movies, I have seen actors in foreign movies frequently used to tattoo, so very first my interest grew from here and after that as we know that something fascinates us so much that we tend to driven

in it, and It made me interested so much that I couldn't wait to have it (Figure 4).

This case is of Individual E, who has driven into tattoo very firstly through a Television show. She is a tattoo artist by profession now, but she had her very first tattoo much before she came into this profession, when asked about what made her got interested on having a tattoo she said- you know what I always had an interest in tattoos. It came when I was in class XI or X, a TV series used to come. there was a tattoo artist is shown I got interested from there. I couldn't wait to watch that TV series every day. I was just waiting until I get 18 years and then I did rush for the tattoo, just I have completed my school life, I went on to have a tattoo.

Individual F, who is a tattoo artist by profession has always been interested into tattoo, this interest came from many TV shows like WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) and all. He got attracted toward that from his school days- when I was in class VII or VIII, I used to watch WWE and saw those big wrestlers... those who had tattoos, and I always used to copy them and draw it on my hands actually



Figure 1: Individual A's tattoo - the most important charger of his life, Coffee.



Figure 2: Individual B's tattoo of her pet dog named Leo, a fawn coloured Labrador with the mark of a paw.



Figure 3: Individual C's tattoo -A birthday gift to his wife, with her name inked on his hand.

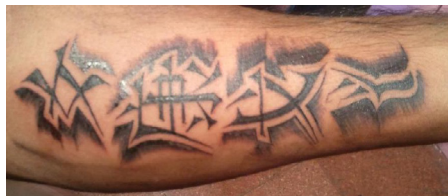


Figure 4: Individual D's tattoo of his very own name in Chinese letters.

what, it was something that dragged me onto it, something I never lost interest on, then after completing my school I did graduation and then job. So, the spark was always with me, but I was getting away from it gradually in this meantime I had a tattoo, my first tattoo.

Idolizing someone

Participants are found in this present study, who have been motivated to get tattooed from someone they are very fond of or they think as their idol. This includes their favorite writer or their favorite rock star or their favorite film star.

For Individual G who is a journalist, was very fond of Sukumar Ray. His first tattoo includes the picture of the cat from Sukumar Ray's famous Bengali story 'Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law'. He can relate him with the thought of the cat of that story- that's was my first tattoo, the cat from Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law. I perceive myself as a thinker like the cat R, who used to affect others thought by his own thought process... so anyway that's why I have done the cat as my first tattoo (Figure 5a).

When it comes to his second tattoo the same motivations are worked there as well. He has made tattoo of his favorite rock star Kurt Cobain. As being a journalist he has always been interested in writings that could poems, or a song or an article. He associates his way of writings with Kurt Cobain so he did a tattoo of him. My second tattoo is of Kurt Cobain my favorite rock-star. I did it on the end of 2014 probably. I associate my way of thinking my type of music and writings with him. I am influenced by him greatly- he recounted (Figure 5b).

Individual H, who has got her tattoo on her mom's memory said- about tattoo. I was inspired from Priyanaka Chopra (famous Indian actress) as I am her a die heart fan. I thought to do it in 1st year of graduation when I was 20, I guess. I did my tattoo on my mom's birthday who is no more. My tattoo says 'mom's lil girl, it's a gift from me to my mom. Maybe she is not here to see it, but I know that I feel happy to do that for her. Just like Priyanka did it for her dad, that she idolizes Priyanka Chopra, and she got the tattoo like her on the same place. She just replaced the word "Daddy's lil' girl" with "Mom's lil' girl" (Figure 6).

Early teen interest

Many participants have responded that in their teenage they are just driven into tattoo and have done one, nowadays many teenage people have tattoos according to many tattoo artists. There is something which has growing a craze in teenagers, and many of people had grown interest in their teen ages and opted for a tattoo. According to a tattoo artist "very recently I see the kids coming from school come here and often ask I will do a tattoo how much I have to pay and all. I say go to home and play."

Individual I, first became interested in tattoos when he went to boarding school as a young teenager. He was tattooed by the time he

was 16. In his boarding the old techniques of doing tattoo were used, it was done manually without a tattoo machine. He got his first and second tattoo from there. He first learned about tattooing from there and then one day a friend of him did his first tattoo, which was now covered up. He is now, a renowned tattoo artist in Kolkata from a renowned tattoo parlor. In his note- I was in a boarding school. So many different castes group are present there... I used to mix around a lot of North-east people. Because I used to look like them, and this guys are always into this, tattoo was more famous in North-east areas in compare to Kolkata. So one day I saw a friend of mine got the ink from the pen out a took a needle, and made a thick layer of the ink in the skin and then pierced it by the needle. He was piercing the area several times and them wiping out the ink, and the rest of the ink is staying. So I said to them what you are doing, if you want to do anything draw it by a pen, why you are hurting yourself, you will wash it and it will come out, there is no meaning to do this. But he said to me that it's permanent, but I didn't believe him. 1 month spend gradually, and within this span I always used to check his hand or ask him if it's wiped away or something. I saw it wasn't, so was really surprised. That was the very first time I got to know about tattoo, and it was like a magic to me, so

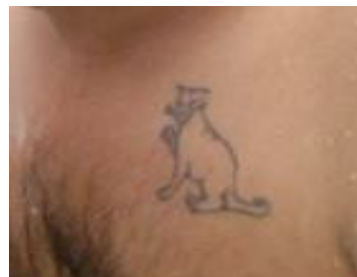


Figure 5a: Individual G's first tattoo that includes a picture of a cat from Sukumar Ray's famous Bengali story 'Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law'.



Figure 5b: Individual G's second tattoo of Kurt Cobain, his favorite rock-star.



Figure 6: Individual H's tattoo says 'Mom's lil girl'... a gift to her mom, inspired by her idol, Priyanka Chopra.

I said one of my friend to do it on me, he did, that was my first tattoo, which is now quite hidden. And the second one basically nothing he wished to do a tattoo and said to me, I said ok do it, this is actually a tribal tattoo, this is the only meaningless tattoo I had now.

Individual J, who is a tattoo artist now by profession. She got interested in tattoos in her early teen, when she was 17. And went to a tattoo artist to have a tattoo, the tattoo artist denied to tattoo her as she is not an adult, so after she is on 18, she went on again to have a tattoo and then she had her first tattoo and gradually her body started to cover with tattoos. After that she got very fond of the tattoo artist and decided to learn tattooing from him, and did so. At present, she is still learning tattooing- one day at evening I came to his house and asked you do tattoo, right? He said yes. I said open the door let me see the designs... after observing me, he asked me about my age, and I said 17... I will be soon 18. He said to me after I become 18 then can have it. I asked him you will not do the tattoo, He said no, I said ok and went out. After the incident 4/5 months I came back and said I am now 18 now do it, and then I done a tattoo on my left-hand palms upper side, then started filling up my body with tattoos gradually, then one day I said I will learn tattoo."

Individuality

It was seen often that the participants present in this study has said that making tattoo made them feel unique, as it is something different to them, something that is very own to them. Here is a case that shows the participant perception to his tattoo. As we have already mentioned about Individual G, has motivated to get his first two tattoos that he idolizes. But when ask about his thought of individuality regarding tattoo he said that tattoo makes him feel different, unique. As you can buy new clothes but same can do other people, but tattoo is your very own. Something that other can't have. As he designed his own tattoo he thinks that it is very own and very much unique, which would not be common with any other- after getting every tattoo, I felt different, just like we do feel when we wear new clothes, new shoes. Now if you ask about unique. then yes, I do feel, because in case of dress or jeans or shoes that we have, nothing is made just for me, but tattoo is something that idea came from my mind and it's just and just for me, therefore off course it is something unique.

Fashion

Tattoo is a fashion statement for many people. According to many tattoo artists, there are many people who used to go for a tattoo just for fashion or beautification. "Nowadays maximum people do tattoo for fashion or beautification" says Individual K, owner of a tattoo studio. The description of the case of Individual L who is presently pursuing her PhD will provide a clearer vision in support to the above statement. Seeing many of her friends getting tattoo she also thought to have one. She always loves to experience the latest fashion trends and the new things, having a tattoo are just like something to her. In her voice- I just have one tattoo and I have done just for experiencing about it. I have done it on 2013. It was just a fashion statement for me. It just attracted me, I saw some of my friends had done it. There is no big reason, I just wished for and had it. I always feel good to try new things. I like to experience all those stuff. New things, latest fashion trends attract me." (Figure 7).

To hide a scar

Hiding a scar has been found as an important reason of doing a tattoo. Participants are found to those who said they have done tattoo to hide their cut marks.

Individual M, a college student, did his first tattoo very recently, just before this interview. He has written a word "Nemesis" as his tattoo. There were severe cut marks on his hand, which he did by cutting his hand. So, he wanted to cover that up, and he wanted to cover that up with one of his favorite word, and he did so. The word "Nemesis" is of a Greece goddess. He said- I have several cut marks in my hand, which I did for a girl who don't even deserve all this, so I wanted to hide those scars. I was always fond of tattoos, so I did decide to have a tattoo. My first tattoo, it was my most favorite word. Nemesis stands for the goddess who comes to destroy the evil. She comes for the person who can't protest or who just tolerate everything, so then Nemesis come and destroy and punish them.

Showcasing the body

Participants mostly those who have a buildup body have said, that full sleeves tattoos are suitable for a muscular body, and that makes the body more attractive. Here a case is described below who thinks tattoo helps to showcasing the body much more. This story is of Individual N, who is on their family business of advertisement; beside he is also a gym trainer. We meet and talk to him when he was having the tattoo in a tattoo parlor. He was doing full sleeves Maori tattoo on his hand, he mainly doing it as it may help him in his profession. As being a gym trainer he has to show his body out, he thinks that having the tattoo will make it much more attractive- we have advertisement business, so it's a very common thing within us. I am gym trainer so this all is very common. It helps me in my profession. We have to show our body and the tattoo makes it more attractive. If a normal people does the tattoo, who hasn't had a buildup body it will not be suitable. The body John Abraham buildup in Force and the tattoo that will suit him, will not suit a normal people having a normal body. If you have biceps, forearms a built-up body then the tattoo will be highlighted.

In the memory of someone

Participants are found in this present study those who have done tattoo in the memory of deceased people who are very close to them. They said that this made them happy and some said that this made them feel that the person is always with him. Memorial tattoo found in this study is portrait and some other choices that depict their feelings about the deceased one. Individual O, a web designer by profession, has gone through a very sad incident in his life. He has lost his brother on an accident in 2007. He had thought about doing something for his brother, after some years passed he thought about having a tattoo in the memory of his brother. The tattoo has an outline of the heart, within which a person standing waving his hand to the sky and clouds that's depicts heaven with a quote written "Till we meet again" and a



Figure 7: Individual L's tattoo provides a clearer vision in support to her statement, "Latest fashion trends attract me - I like to experience and try all new things".

flame of the candle lighted on the heart. This depicts his never-ending love for his brother he had in his heart- this tattoo is the only tattoo I had, and I made this in the memory of my brother who is no more. I could never ever have imagined a life without him... he was my best friend, someone upon whom I can always rely on. I miss him a lot; we all feel his absence in our daily life... anyway... I have thought to do something for him in his memory, so I thought about having a tattoo, carrying the memory of my own brother in my body is something that I couldn't describe (Figure 8).

Individual P, who is also a tattoo artist by his profession, has lost his mother some year before. He had done a portrait of his mother on his upper arm. He thinks it about carrying a memory of his mother whole life through his body- this portrait is of my mother, whom I had lost 1 year before. I thought to do this portrait on her birthday. I always do keep her picture with me, so one day I thought about why not carry it on my body, it made me feel much closer to her, believe me (Figure 9).

Spiritual belief

Participants are found to having a tattoo based on their spiritual beliefs, and it also comes when they are suggesting or advising for a tattoo to their client. People are found to choose their lucky charm as their tattoo and some thinks that tattoo has positive and negative energy; the following case will make the view clear.

Individual Q, who is a tattoo artist by profession shares his spiritual believe that is associated with tattoo as per him. He thinks that tattoo can give you positivity and as well as negativity. If you have something positive as your tattoo like images of god or any powerful spell it will have a good impact in your life. Similarly having something negative as tattoo will bring the negative energy in your life- a friend of mine



Figure 8: Individual O's tattoo in the memory of his brother, who he had lost in an accident...with a quote written - "Till we meet again".

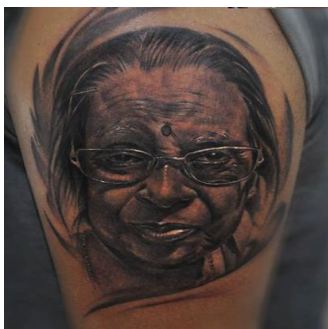


Figure 9: Individual P's tattoo carrying a portrait of his mother, whom he had lost 1 year before.

wanted a design of a clock, I advised him several times not to do that, but he didn't listen to me, so I did it afterwards. I can't for him after all as it is my profession. So, after doing that design on clock he is facing a bad time in his life. Actually, if do tattoo like a stopped time, which he did in that design, so actually you face a bad time in your life. There are many things related to tattoo. It's not only a drawing, it's on your body and you are culturing it. Suppose you are making a design of a skull, then what does this skull depicts? Devil, then if you do that tattoo then it's obvious that Satan/Devil will come to your life, actually you are inviting them. What you keep in your body, you think like that, and you become like that. The things we think, that only happens. I hope you will believe it on too...even tattoo has positive impact too. The Mantras (spell) in our Indian culture for example the Mahamritunjaya Mantra, Gayetri Mantra this spells works very positively in your life. If you have that in your body you see it every day and you do spell it every day too, and believe me it works.

Discussion

Several studies over the last couple of years show there is an increasing rate of getting tattoo among the people from all types of ages, occupations, social classes, gender [19] and major representations were from high school adolescents and college students [20]. As Per Bell [21], tattooing is "sometimes struggle for individualization in a society". There are many reasons for getting tattoos including describing personal tales, expressing individuality, spiritual meaning, fashion, marking new beginnings like birth, adulthood, marriage, divorce, death, etc. and even marking memories as milestone for love or loss [22]. There are myths that people got tattoos for personal advertisement as for others seeing and interpreting more about it [21]. Study of Johnson [23] revealed that there are a lot of influence comes from television and movies where people did their tattoos on their body to make them more like to the character portrayed on the screen; not physically but through an emotional connection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that there may be varied reasons as well as meaning behind what is visibly seen are as varied as the people involved. The present research indicates that there is no one group, no one age or gender, no one occupation type, no one personality, and no particular level of social status that get tattoos. We may conclude from the subjective stories of the respondents that major motivations for acquisition tattoos varied and can be expressed here through the following categories: personal tale, media (social and electrical), individuality, idolizing someone, fashion, scar hiding, marking memory, spiritual meaning to showcasing body. Though further studies are encouraged to include a larger sample with a larger age distribution may investigate to which motives dominates at different ages, memories, experiences, values, spirituality, sexuality, socio economic groups in a much broader spectrum.

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