

Ink on the skin: Symbolic significance of ink-expressions from the perspective of Tattoo bearers

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Tattooing is a form of skin modification practiced with a broad array of beliefs, techniques and significance over centuries around the world. Despite worldwide proliferation, acceptance, and popularity, tattoos provoke stigma-based discrimination. The tattoo culture in Sri Lanka has been fast-growing with a mix of positive and negative social responses. Hence, using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study, from the perspective of tattoo bearers, explored the intent behind acquiring a tattoo, the significance of tattoos as symbols of expression, and social responses to tattoos. The tattoo bearers (N=20) were purposively chosen from a contemporary tattoo studio in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that focused on demographic details, the intent of tattooing, the nature of tattoos and their symbolic meanings, and social responses to their tattoos. Thematic analysis of interviews through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism revealed that the key intents of acquiring tattoos were expressing different virtues and narratives such as loss and grief, portraying 'self' as trendy, re-correcting flaws on the skin, pleading blessings, expressing resilience and spirituality, commemorating achievements, preserving memories, and expressing intimacy. Tattooing was a symbol of expressing the rites of passage, victimization, self-empowerment, self-confidence and endurance. Respondents explained a complex blend of experiences of both appreciation and condemnation of their tattoos due to lookism-based stigma against tattoos, and this varied by the gender, the nature of tattoo design, and the size and visibility of the tattoo on the body. Personal, emotional, and spiritual meanings that tattoos encompass were restrained by sensitive mainstream social values. In summary, tattoos were revealed as a way of expressing 'self-identity' in a society that often did not embrace fully the particular mode of expression.

Keywords: Tattoos, Stigma against tattoos, Symbolic significance of tattoos.

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