

Cultural tattoos: meanings, descriptors, and attributions

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Body piercing and tattoo/ta moko were initially seen to be practiced by sailors, criminals, specific cultural groups (e.g., Māori), or sub-cultural groups (e.g., bikers, gang members, adolescents). In recent times, these practices have become part of mainstream popular culture, and are enjoyed by a wide range of people. In this study, we set out to explore patterns of body modifying behaviour engaged in, or commented on, by a sample of university students. We invited undergraduate psychology students from two courses to complete an 'online' questionnaire. Students logged on to a web site, were presented with an information sheet, and invited to respond. In this paper, we present the reasons why people in this sample decided to obtain a tattoo and the meanings they ascribe to their modifications. We will also consider the observations that people make of those who have culturally inspired tattoos.

To date, we know of no recent public attitude surveys conducted within New Zealand concerned with tattoos or body modifying behaviours. In this study we set out to explore patterns of body modifying behaviour engaged in or commented on by a sample of university students in anticipation of a survey of a more diverse and larger sample at some later time.

There were 24 men and 111 women in the sample¹. In total, there were 137 respondents². Just over one fifth (n=30, 22%) of the sample were under the age of 20 years. Fifty six percent (n=77, 56%) were aged between 21 and 30 years old. The remainder of the sample (n=30, 22%) were over the age of 30 years. The sample contained 30 respondents who identified in some way as Māori. The majority identified as Pākehā, European, New

Zealander, or Kiwi³. Thirty-five of 136 respondents (26%) had a tattoo, and 48 of 134 respondents (36%) anticipated future tattoos.

Procedure

We invited undergraduate psychology students from one 2nd year, and one 1st year course to complete an 'online' questionnaire. Students logged on to a web site, were presented with an information sheet, and invited to respond to the questionnaire.

The online questionnaire contained 64 items and surveyed students' behaviours and attitudes towards tattoos and body piercings. They included questions focussed around the following themes.

- Why get tattooed/pierced
- What tattoos/piercings mean
- Having tattoos/piercings removed
- Getting more tattoos/piercings and why
- Opinions about different types of tattoos/piercings

¹ We suspect that this figure is slightly inaccurate due to web based technical problems. However, on examining the enrolments of men and women in the courses surveyed, the proportion of men to women suggests that the inaccuracy is only slight.

² Respondents could choose not to answer questions they did not want to.

³ Participants were invited to describe their ethnicity as they wished to.

In this paper, we present and discuss the reasons why respondents decided to obtain a tattoo, and the attributions that respondents made of cultural tattoos. Wearers' motivations for obtaining a tattoo were acquired by simply asking wearers why they had become so. To gain an appreciation of what respondents thought about cultural tattoos we asked them to complete the following statement.

I think that cultural tattoos are "....." because ".....".

By using the above statements, we invited participants to create a picture in their own minds of what a 'cultural tattoo'. We assumed that all respondents would be able to do this and that most would focus on Māori moko, in particular, facial tattoos – especially given the exposure of moko in mainstream media, and the increasing visibility of moko wearers across a variety of settings.

As all of the data collected in this part of the study was qualitative, content analysis procedures were applied to the data and thematic areas identified. These were in turn used as a framework for coding data.

Results

Tattoos – Motivations

People are motivated to mark their skin for a variety of reasons. We asked those in this sample who were tattooed (n=34) their reasons for doing so. We identified seven related emergent social identity themes. Although possibly an over-simplification of the data, the identification of themes is helpful to building an increased understanding of motivations and meanings. The themes identified are listed in Table 1 along with the number and percentage of wearers who made mention of each theme in their responses.

Identity expression

That is, a personalised marking, an expression of oneself, a mark to identify my body – captures the idea of skin marking as an extension of ones personal self.

I have always wanted a tattoo. For me it is a personalised marking of who I am

I got all 3 tattoos to symbolise achievements, or certain events which happened in my life. They are an expression of self...

So some body can tell that it's my body.

Table 1.
Why Get Tattooed?

	n=34	%
Identity	11	32%
Desire-design	9	26%
Event	5	15%
Group association	4	12%
Significant other	4	12%
Youth	3	9%
Image	2	6%

Desire Design

Expressions of desire can take many forms. Desire may be something as simple as admiration, liking, wanting, or longing. It may be motivated by the appeal of a design type and form, the symbolic representation, or, simply personal choice.

Liked the design, a birthday present

I like the look of them and really wanted to have one.

Event

Life events and achievements were viewed as times to mark, symbolise, and remember. Involvements in sporting groups, obtaining an educational degree, or the death or departure of a significant other, are examples.

I got all 3 tattoos to symbolise achievements...

Both of my tattoos represent a special event or time in my life.

Part One was to celebrate the Year 2000 and to reflect my involvement in waka ama. Part Two was to acknowledge the educational path I had just completed.

Group Association

Whom one associates with, or the social groups that one is a member of can create a context of expectation, or pressure. As the quotes below illustrate, prisons and gangs are social settings where marking the skin is not simply an expectation, but an integral statement of belonging.

I got my tattoos while I was in goal and it was a mark to acknowledge that I had been there. My tattoos are known as boob-tatts and they are so styled, i.e., skulls, knives, symbols...

To be part of the gang. This was expected.

Significant Other

Related to associating with some group or belonging to a particular social context, is one's relatedness to some significant other. Some of these wearers marked their skins to symbolise a relationship with some other. These might be family members, children, or friends.

I have always admired them. My Nana passed away 6 years ago, and I have a deep sense of loss for her as she was one of my main carers when my parents were at work. My Nana took me to her homeland when I was 5. Waking in the morning at 5 to attend morning service (Cook Islands) I smelt Frangapanis (flower) they remind me of Nana. So I decided to get a tattoo of a Frangapani - it has significance for me.

Youth

What people have done in their youth and adolescent years may be perceived quite differently when they are older. This category tends to deal with reflections that some participants had when looking back to a younger age when they had marked their skins. For many, they conclude a regretful position.

I was under the influence and very young

I was VERY young when I got my tattoo and I think it was mainly an attention

thing, not that I'd flash people but I knew how I thought, at the time, that people with tattoos were cool, so I thought that others may think the same for me. It wasn't a very good reason at all!

Image

The character or personality of an individual as perceived by others is something that is in continuous negotiation through social interaction. For some participants, their skin art was an attempt to portray a particular image.

To rebel, to look tough

Was young and thought it would be cool to create and make my own design and have it somewhere on my body

I think that cultural tattoos are...

I think that cultural tattoos are "....." because ".....".

Attributions

All participants, wearers and non-wearers, were invited to make an attribution about cultural tattoos, and further, to provide an explanation of their attribution. Overall, the majority of participants (n=138) provided positive attributions with only 17% of participants providing negative. We felt that the attributions fell across seven thematic areas. The response rates for each of these themes appear in Table 2. Given that participants were invited to offer at least 'one word' attributions, the most popular have been presented according to thematic area in Table 3. These themes and sub-themes are not elaborated further as their meanings are somewhat obvious.

Explaining the attributions

Further information about what the attributions actually mean can be derived from the written explanations that participants gave after the "because" part of the statement that they were asked to complete. In Table 4 we report the major themes arising from responses that participants made (n=125). Overall, their explanations focussed on cultural tattoos

reflecting group belonging (87%), pride and confidence (39%), and a mark of identity either personal or social (36%). A small number (7%) of respondents highlighted the extent to which cultural tattoos may negatively position a wearer and attract unwanted attention and discrimination.

Table 2.

Themes - I Think Cultural Tattoos Are?

	n=138	%*
Appealing	51	37%
Group identified	41	30%
Shows allegiance	38	28%
Assert their identity	30	22%
Negatively described	17	12%
Exhibiting themselves	9	7%
Here	7	5%

*Some responses have been coded into more than one theme.

Table 3.

Sub-themes – I Think Cultural Tattoos Are?

Appealing	Group identified	Shows allegiance
Interesting	Proud	Very determined
Awesome	Traditional	Brave
Fine	Culturally expressive	Confident
Great	Culturally aware	Loyal
Living works of art	Honourable	Determined
Cool	Respectful to their culture	Committed
Here		
Negatively described	Assert identity	Exhibiting themselves
Wrong to do so	Expressing themselves	Making a statement
Lost	Being unique	Showing off
Stereotyped	Are different	Provocative
Scary	Are individuals	Displaying themselves
	Are special	
	Are normal	

Table 4.

Cultural Tattoos: Explaining the Attribution.

	n=125	%
...they reflect group belonging	87	70%
...they display pride	39	31%
...they reflect an identity	36	29%
...they make a statement	18	14%
...they look great	13	10%
...they have negative consequences	9	7%

*Some responses are coded more than once.

Summary

The results suggest that becoming tattooed is mainly an expression of personal identity that is often related to social or cultural group membership and belonging. Attributions of cultural tattoos were focussed on appeal and group association factors. Although cultural tattoos were attributed negative descriptors, these seemed out-weighted by positive descriptors. The attributions made of cultural tattoos were rationalised by reference to group belonging, pride, and identity. The findings of this preliminary study suggest that a public survey of attitudes about cultural tattoos is likely to reveal positive responses to the resurgence of moko as an art form, and to contemporary day wearers.