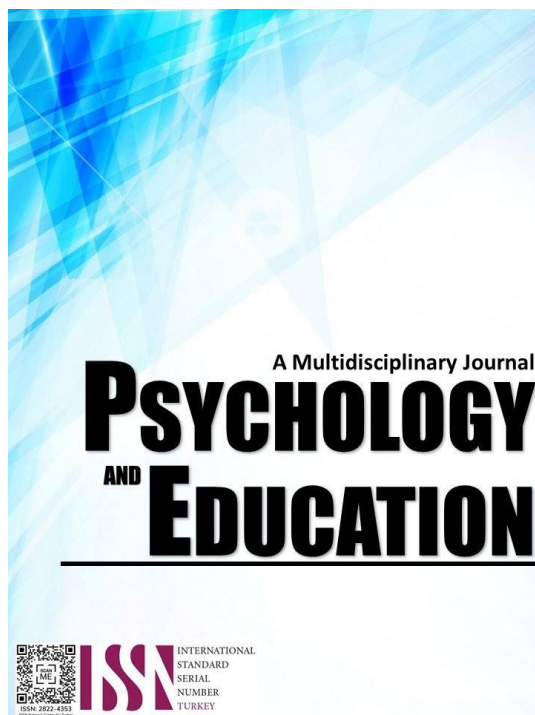


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A Phenomenological Study on the Impacts of Tattoo Discrimination on the Mental Health among Employees

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Abstract

Tattoos, pervasive across human history, serve as expressions of identity, beliefs, and experiences. Recent trends highlight a global surge in tattoo prevalence, yet societal acceptance varies widely. This study explores the impact of tattoo discrimination on mental health, particularly within professional contexts, where biases manifest through hiring practices, and promotion decisions. Employing Becker's Labeling Theory as a framework, the research examines how societal perceptions influence workplace dynamics and individual well-being. The study addresses a significant research gap by investigating Filipino perspectives on tattoo discrimination, contributing to global discourse on workplace inclusivity. Through thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, the study uncovers personal narratives, coping strategies, and the nuanced roles tattoos play in self-expression and resilience. Findings illuminate tattoos not only as aesthetic choices but as profound markers of personal history and empowerment, challenging stereotypes and advocating for workplace equity and mental health support.

Keywords: *tattoo discrimination, mental health, workplace, employees, phenomenology*

Introduction

Tattoos have been a part of human culture for millennia, serving as expressions of personal identity, beliefs, and experiences. In recent years, the prevalence of tattoos has surged, with an increasing number of individuals choosing to adorn their bodies with intricate designs and meaningful symbols. A recent survey by Dalia (2018) has revealed the countries in which the most people have 'got ink'. In Italy, almost 48% of the population has tattoos, so, for the most part, they are more open to accept them. Sweden gets in second with 47%, and some other countries in Latin America, for example, have less than 38% of citizens. Still, some countries in this region in Central and South America, and other regions have this idea of tattoos been related to gangs and other illegal organizations.

While tattoos have become a mainstream form of self-expression, they have also raised pertinent questions about their acceptability in professional settings. The issue of tattoo discrimination among employees has emerged as a significant concern, with potential implications for workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion. Tattoo discrimination in the workplace can manifest in various ways, including dress code policies that require employees to cover their tattoos, unequal treatment, or bias in promotions and hiring decisions. These forms of discrimination can lead to feelings of frustration, distress, and a sense of exclusion, contributing to a hostile work environment and can contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. According to a study by Dane (2017), the finding shows that the study understands how societal prejudice or negative attitudes toward tattoos can influence the anxiety experienced by people, whether they have tattoos or not. This research contributes to a better understanding of the broader consequences of societal attitudes and stereotypes associated with tattoos.

Tattoo discrimination is a societal issue that extends to various countries, including the Philippines but there is no comprehensive studies or statistics on this matter and no specific national law in the Philippines explicitly addresses discrimination in the workplace specifically based on tattoos. In these cases, tattoos have been known to be an expression of surviving stressful situations, such as war, disaster or a traumatic event (Wohlrab et al., 2007). Discrimination against individuals with tattoos is not limited to a specific region, and sharing research across continents can help create a broader, more inclusive discussion on the topic.

This study aims to shed light on how the stigmatization of tattoos can affect individuals' psychological well-being, and in turn, influence their quality of life and work. will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by people with tattoos and the potential ramifications or consequences for their mental health. This would also explore potential coping strategies and interventions that individuals and society can employ to mitigate the adverse effects of tattoo discrimination here our country since there is perception about tattoos that carries various stigmas in society, with stereotypes including associations with criminality, rebellion, and other negative labels. This bias often leads to discrimination against tattooed individuals in areas like employment and education. This topic is essential to foster awareness and dialogue. As a psychology major, our role is to recognize, support and understand the mental well-being of others especially those individuals who experienced discrimination in the workplace.

In recent years, there has been a growing attention on how tattoos are viewed in workplaces, both in the Philippines and abroad. A recent local study by Carpio (2024) explained that many Filipinos, especially those from older generations, still see tattoos in a negative light. Tattoos are often associated with rebellion or deviance, and this continues to influence how employers treat tattooed individuals in professional settings.

Internationally, Sharma (2023) looked at how tattoos can be used as a way to cope with trauma. Instead of being seen as rebellious,

tattoos were shown to be meaningful, personal, and healing for those who experienced emotional struggles. Similarly, Alter-Muri (2020) discussed how tattoos could serve as a form of art therapy, helping people express themselves and recover from past pain.

In the Middle East, Al-Twal and Abuhassan (2024) explored the experience of employees with tattoos in Jordan. Their study found that in conservative workplaces, visible tattoos made employees worry about being rejected or judged, adding pressure and fear in the workplace.

Henle et al. (2021) also studied hiring decisions and found that women with visible tattoos were more likely to be judged negatively during job applications, especially for leadership roles. This highlights that tattoo-related bias still exists in many professional settings.

Together, these updated studies help support the current research by showing how tattoo discrimination is experienced in different cultures and how it can affect individuals emotionally and professionally. These sources give updated context and relevance to the present study.

Research Questions

This research aims to determine the impacts of tattoo discrimination on mental health among employees. Specifically, it would seek to answer the following questions:

1. Why do these individuals want to have a tattoo?
2. What are the emotional experiences of individuals after getting a tattoo?
3. In what specific incident or incidents did the individual feel discriminated against in the workplace due to their tattoos?
4. How do participants deal with tattoo discrimination?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative research relates to ideas, perceptions, opinions or beliefs of the person being studied and all of them cannot be measured by numbers. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social human problem. This study adopting a phenomenological approach that allows the researchers to delve deeply into the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals, aiming to uncover insights and understand the intricate ways in which tattoo discrimination influences their mental health within the organizational setting. It employs the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) that explores how individuals make sense of their experiences, the IPA give researchers the best opportunity to understand the most deliberation of the “Lived Experiences” of research participants.

In the context of tattoo discrimination, the process on how would apply the IPA in our research topic would be, conducting in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced tattoo discrimination. In-depth interview is a qualitative research technique where a researcher engages in a detailed, one-on-one conversation with a participant to gather comprehensive and nuanced information about their experiences, perspectives, beliefs, or opinions on a particular topic of interest. Gathering detailed accounts of their experiences, emotions, and perceptions related to the discrimination. Transcribing the interview recordings verbatim, language, and tone. Applying IPA to the study of tattoo discrimination allows researchers to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of individuals, providing a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

Participants revealed that tattoos often serve as commemorations of significant life events and expressions of self-identity. Tattoos memorialize personal history, symbolizing resilience, transformation, and tribute. They also act as channels for emotional expression and personal empowerment. Tattoos provide stress relief and boost self-confidence for many individuals. While some find therapeutic solace in tattoos, others face stress from societal judgments. Tattoos enhance self-image and offer personal meanings, challenging societal norms and fostering self-efficacy. Participants reported facing discrimination, stereotypes, and insensitivity in the workplace, making it challenging to find and maintain employment. Negative perceptions of tattoos as unclean or unattractive affect interactions with coworkers. Overcoming these barriers requires challenging negative beliefs and promoting empathy and understanding. Tattoos empower individuals through self-expression and identity assertion. Participants employ coping mechanisms such as prioritizing mental well-being, disregarding negative feedback, and focusing on positive responses. Tattoos serve as powerful tools for self-empowerment and cultural defiance.

Integration with Theoretical and Empirical Frameworks

The experiences shared by our participants connect closely with what Labeling Theory describes. According to Becker (1963), when people are labeled as deviant or different, they can start to believe those labels and act accordingly. In our study, many participants mentioned that they felt judged or treated unfairly because of their tattoos. This led to feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and even missed opportunities at work.

Some participants shared that being labeled as “unprofessional” made them question their worth, even when they knew they were capable. This kind of internal struggle reflects the self-fulfilling aspect of labeling where people start to believe the negative ideas

others place on them.

At the same time, other participants responded in an empowering way. Instead of hiding their tattoos, they used them as a form of self-expression and pride. This response is also explained by Corrigan and Watson (2012), who said that stigma can lead to either self-shame or resistance, depending on the person and their support system.

Themes in our findings like identity, stress relief, and empowerment also support what Sharma (2023) and Alter-Muri (2020) discussed in their work. They showed how tattoos could be healing, expressive, and helpful in dealing with trauma. Our findings show the same thing: tattoos are not just art they are deeply personal and sometimes therapeutic.

By connecting these theories and studies to our findings, we show that tattoo discrimination is more than just a surface-level issue. It affects how people see themselves and how others treat them, especially in workplaces. Understanding these effects can help organizations become more inclusive and supportive of mental well-being.

Conclusions

After analyzing the data, the researchers delved into the complexity of individuals' relationships with tattoos, uncovering the stories of motivations, coping mechanisms, and experiences of discrimination. The exploration revealed that tattoos serve as more than just aesthetic adornments; they are deeply intertwined with personal identity, self-expression, and emotional well-being through thematic analysis.

Tattoos are deeply tied to personal identity and self-expression, serving as commemorations of significant life events, relationships, and transformative moments. Themes such as "Tattoo as Commemoration" and "Self-Identity through Ink" highlight the emotional depth and symbolic nature of tattoos, which transcend mere aesthetics. They embody resilience, personal narratives, and individuality, providing wearers with a sense of empowerment and continuity amidst life's challenges.

The study revealed that tattoos serve as both therapeutic tools and sources of empowerment. They offer stress relief, self-confidence, and enhanced self-image, particularly for those seeking to challenge societal norms and redefine their identities. However, societal judgments may also trigger stress, underscoring the dual nature of emotional experiences associated with tattoos.

Participants reported facing various forms of workplace discrimination, including stereotypes, insensitivity, and biased perceptions, particularly during job searches and in interactions with coworkers. Tattoos were often viewed as unprofessional or unclean, reflecting deeply ingrained societal biases. These experiences highlighted the challenges tattooed individuals face in navigating professional environments while asserting their identities.

Individuals employed diverse strategies to cope with tattoo-related discrimination. Themes such as "Selective Empowerment through Self-Expression" and "Motivated Feedback Disengagement" illustrate how participants reclaimed their autonomy and upheld personal values. By prioritizing mental well-being, embracing positive feedback, and challenging stereotypes, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in managing societal and workplace biases.

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