College Students Perceptions of Tattoos

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Abstract

There has been previous research conducted on the stereotypical ideologies that others have toward people with tattoos and the discrimination that these individuals suffer from. These studies have found significant data regarding stereotypic thoughts and the effects that these have on people with tattoos. Our research adds valuable data to this topic by studying responses to a picture of an individual with and without tattoos to determine level of bias. We hypothesized that people would have more stereotypic attitudes toward people with visible tattoos versus people without visible tattoos. To measure this, we projected images onto a screen of a man and of a woman without tattoos for our control group, and for our experimental group, the same images of the individuals with tattoos edited onto them. Participants then rated both positive and negative statements about the individual in the image on a Likert Scale. Information was also collected about whether participants had tattoos and if they would consider getting one. Contrary to our hypothesis, participants who viewed the people with tattoos did not show significantly higher negative stereotypic ideology toward the people in the images than those that viewed the people without tattoos.
College Students Perceptions of Tattoos

The age-old practice of body art expression has been a hot topic of debate for many years. Some people believe that our bodies are a blank canvas waiting to be decorated, while others think tattoos are a manifestation of rebellion and deviancy against societal norms. Although the issue is still unresolved and feelings about tattoos continue to be undecided, the number of individuals who are getting tattoos is increasing (Greenblatt, 2014). As the number of people who are deciding to get a tattoo is growing, there is a fear that these individuals will be misconceived and become victims of stereotypes and discrimination because of the way they choose to express themselves. Unfortunately, stigmas are already eminent as people who have tattoos are less likely to receive a job because of their body image (Timming, Nickson, & Perrett, 2017, p. 134). It is important to study how people with tattoos are stereotyped to reduce the generalizing negative stigmas that are placed on them and that are many times incorrect.

As tattoos have become more common, studies determining their effects are becoming more important. Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko (2014) conducted a study on 452 undergraduate students whose ages range from 15 to 59. The study took place in a classroom setting in which the participants received a packet with a consent form and two questionnaires: one for individuals with tattoos and one for individuals without. The questionnaire for participants with tattoos asked questions related to stigma and discrimination that these people have experienced, while on the other hand, the questionnaire for participants without tattoos addressed questions related to stigmas and attitudes toward people with tattoos. This study included many results, the most prevalent finding was that participants believe that people with tattoos tend to be more violent.
Another study by Martin and Dula (2010), consisted of 210 undergraduate participants that rated a series of 17 statements written for that study which determined stigmas against tattoos. Participants also completed a big five personality test to determine whether their personality type had an impact on their results. The survey included statements like: “anyone that has been to prison is likely to have tattoos,” which was rated by participants on a 6-point Likert scale. To no surprise, the study found that people who have tattoos scored significantly lower on the stigma test than people who did not have tattoos.

Although Dickson et al. (2014) studied stigmas attached to people with tattoos, they focused more on individual experience rather than perceptions. Our study intended to leave the participants oblivious to the fact that they were taking part in a research study about tattoos. Instead of answering questions about how violent a person with a tattoo may be, our participants viewed an image of a tattooed person and rated on a 6-point Likert scale how violent they believe the individual might be. The purpose of our study was to see how positively or negatively an individual would be perceived with and without tattoos. We believed that the images of the individuals with tattoos would be rated more negatively than the images of the same individuals without tattoos. There are several sources that support our thinking; for example, Larsen, Patterson, and Markham (2014) found that both people who perform tattoos and those who have them face stigmas in everyday life (p. 671). Other research agrees that although tattoos are becoming more common, people still tend to have negative misconceptions about these people’s “personal lives” (Martin & Dula, 2010). As body art has become more mainstream, it is critical to study the perceptions that others have toward individuals with tattoos, as these people’s lives can become affected by them in their every day activities. Foltz (2014) found that “when asked to imagine they were the hiring partner in charge of hiring a college
intern, 61.2% of respondents indicated if an applicant had visible tattoos, their decision on whether to hire the applicant would be negatively impacted” (p. 596). Not only are individuals with tattoos suffering from negative perceptions people have formed of them, but these individuals’ important life decisions may also be affected by the way people perceive them because of their tattoos.

The intent of our study is to determine whether tattoos effect individuals’ perceptions of a person. We predicted that people are more likely to have negative stereotypes toward individuals with visible tattoos versus individuals without visible tattoos. Although previous literature has explored many topics concerning tattoos and their effects on the wearers and observers, we used images of individuals and measured the participants perceptions. We found other research that also used images, but unlike our images, the pictures were of individuals with their tattoos uncovered, and then the same individuals with their tattoos covered in a nice outfit. For example, the first image shows a person in workout clothing revealing their tattoos, while in the other image they are wearing a doctor’s coat which covers their tattoos. We found that changing the individuals attire can prove to be a confounding variable since a person’s clothing can modify a person’s perception. We decided to eliminate as many confounding variables as possible to find more pure results; therefore, we used the exact same images of individuals (clothing, pose, posture, and facial expressions) but edited tattoos onto them.

Our study is important because although there are advances in awareness and tolerance of many things, including race, sexual orientation, and religion, body image seems to be left behind. Instead of less rules and regulations that hinder people from expressing their individuality freely, there appears to be more hoops that people have to jump through to get a job or to simply be socially acceptable.
Method

Participants

Our study consisted of 12 participants of which 75% were women and 25% were men. 58.3% of participants were White, 33.3% were Hispanic or Latino, and 8.3% were Black or African American. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 48 ($M = 21.42$, $SD = 8.45$). Participants were recruited through SONA systems, which is an online subject pool through which students sign up to participate in research studies.

Design and Procedure

Our research study was experimental because we manipulated our independent variable, which was the presence or absence of tattoos on the individuals in the images, and a dependent variable, which were the participants’ perceptions of those images. Our study was a between subjects’ design because we had two conditions, a control group and an experimental group. The participants were randomly assigned to each condition. The control group viewed the images of individuals without tattoos, whereas the experimental group viewed the images of the individuals with tattoos.

To conduct our study, we utilized visual stimuli which consisted of two images, one of a man and the other of a woman. The images were collected by one of the researchers. In the original images, which were both in color, the man was wearing gym shorts and a sleeveless shirt. The woman was also wearing gym shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Neither of the individuals were smiling and they were in a natural pose. In the edited images, the pictures were the same, but tattoos were added to the individuals. The man had a scorpion tattoo on his chest, a skull and a star on his left upper arm, and a mid-length sleeve on his right arm. The woman had a sea horse
tattoo on her left upper arm, a deer on her right upper arm, and flowers on her left thigh. The models signed an image release form which gave us permission to use their images in our study.

The questionnaire that we created consisted of 20 questions designed to measure the participants’ perceptions of the individuals in the images they viewed. Ten of the questions were reversed coded to detect any inconsistencies in the participants answers. The scale was scored with a Likert type scale with 1 = strongly disagree and, 6 = strongly agree. Higher scores on the survey indicated a positive perception of the individual in the image. Some of the statements included in the survey were: “This person appears responsible,” and “This person is likely to be violent”. After the survey was completed, the participants filled out a demographic questionnaire that included questions about race, age, gender, and whether the participants had a tattoo or not and if not, whether they were considering getting one in the future.

The study took place in a classroom on campus. The participants were greeted, asked to silence their cellphones, and were given an informed consent form which they had a few minutes to read and sign. The participants then received a packet which consisted of two surveys stapled together and we explained that they would view an image projected on the screen and they would answer a survey about the photograph. The participants then viewed an image of a person on a PowerPoint presentation, either with or without tattoos, projected onto the screen. The participants had five minutes per image to answer the survey which was measured by a stopwatch. When the five minutes elapsed, a second image appeared on the screen and the participants answered a second survey with the same questions for the second image. Once the surveys were completed, the participants received a demographic questionnaire. Once finished, they were asked to put both their surveys and demographic information in a box located at the front of the classroom to ensure confidentiality. The participants were thanked and given a
Results

Our hypothesis was that people were more likely to have negative stereotypes toward individuals with visible tattoos versus individuals without visible tattoos. In our demographics questionnaire, we asked participants if they had a tattoo, to which 33.3% indicated that they did ($M = 4.23, SD = .49$) and 66.6% indicated that they did not ($M = 3.80, SD = .63$). The participants’ scored statements about the individuals in the pictures which were added up and averaged, and a higher mean indicated less stereotypic perceptions of the people in the images, whereas a lower mean indicated higher stereotypic perception of the people in the images. We used an independent sample $t$-test to analyze our data and our results showed that people who viewed the images of individuals without tattoos did not score significantly higher ($M = 3.97, SD = .67$) than those that viewed the images of the individuals with tattoos ($M = 3.93, SD = .60$), $t(10) = .12, p = .909, d = .08$. Therefore, our hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

Summary and Results

For our study, we predicted that participants who viewed images of individuals with tattoos would demonstrate more negative stereotypes as opposed to participants who viewed the images of individuals without tattoos. Or results did not support our hypothesis; therefore, we found that the individuals who viewed the images of the people with tattoos did not display more stereotypic perceptions than those who viewed the images of people without tattoos.

Martin and Dula (2010) conducted a similar study, but instead of showing their participants images, the participants took a test on attitudes of tattooed persons which consisted...
of biased statements that the participants rated on a Likert-scale. They predicted that participants who had tattoos would have less negative attitudes toward others with tattoos than those that did not. Their hypothesis was supported. We also asked participants whether they had tattoos, but we did not collect a sufficient amount of data to find significant results. We hypothesized that the people in the photographs who had tattoos would be more heavily criticized by our participants than those that did not have tattoos. Our participants did not receive any other information about the people in the images, only their physical appearance, so they were scoring the individuals purely based on visual representation. Since our hypothesis was not supported, our participants did not demonstrate a significant bias against the images of the people with tattoos.

It is important to keep in mind that our society is constantly changing, and ideologies of what is correct and moral are adapting. It is our hope that our findings demonstrate that there is a broader acceptance of individuals with tattoos and that stereotypes are decreasing. Our study was conducted with college-aged participants, with all of them but one ranging from 18 to 22. It could be very possible that our hypothesis was not supported because of the age group that participated in the study. Perhaps if the study were conducted on a broader age group, the results would support our hypothesis because it is more common for older people to stereotype tattooed individuals because of their upbringing (As cited in Foltz, 2014, p. 594).

Positives and Limitations

Our research is valuable for multiple reasons. Adding images for participants to rate the physical appearance of the people in the photographs was a great addition to past studies that have been conducted on the topic of tattoos and stereotypes. We also created our own survey that measures stereotypic perceptions of participants which can be used in future research. We reduced the amount of confounding variables by having the individuals in the images use the
same clothing in both images, having both a man and a woman model, and both models being of the same race to reduce racial biases that may affect our results. We also reversed coded nine out of 20 questions so that we could use both positive and negative statements in the survey.

One of the limitations of our study is that only four of our participants had a tattoo, and the rest did not. Having a larger number of participants could have affected our results because of age, as mentioned before, and because there was not a significant amount of diversity of participants to make assumptions about the general public, since the majority of participants were White women. One thing I would add to our study is a variable about the participants religious beliefs. It would be interesting to see if religion has an impact on the way people view others with tattoos, and if so, what religions affect those ideologies more. I would expect to find that religion does have a significant impact on the way people view tattoos. If I were to do the study again, I would add more images of both individuals with tattoos and images of individuals without to see if the results vary. Attractiveness of the individual in the picture could also affect the results; therefore, larger number of images of individuals ranging in attractiveness may help determine that. We included a question in our survey about attractiveness, but we did not find that attractiveness scores had a significant impact on overall scores.

**Future Research**

With our study, we intend to give information about stereotypes that people with tattoos encounter so that through knowledge, people can see the reality of the discrimination and struggles that these individuals face. We hope to raise interest in other researchers to conduct studies with different perspectives to look at the issue more completely. Since our research was conducted at a college level; perhaps, future research could conduct a similar study with older participants, or maybe even change the age of the people in the images to see if that affects the
results. Adding a Big Five Personality Measure, as done by Martin and Dula (2010) could also help determine if a participant’s personality has an influence on results. For example, a person who scores higher in openness may show less stereotypic ideologies toward an individual with tattoos. Larger sample sizes could also add a variety to variables such as gender and tattoos a participant might have.

**Conclusion**

Although it is difficult not to judge people simply by the way they look, it is not impossible. Hopefully over time, individuals will not take one look at people and determine how they feel about their lifestyle, but take the time needed to know them and judge them on their actions and not their looks. As studies like ours continue to take place, we are empowering future generations with the information they need to shape and mold our society to create one that is respectful of all people, not just the ones that look similar. We hope that our study is an inspiration to others to continue to research topics that are relevant to our time and that can help better the lives of the people around us.
References

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