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A comparison of college students’ perceptions of older and younger tattooed women

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ABSTRACT
A randomly assigned sample of 376 college students responded to a survey involving a between-subjects 2 x 3 experiment designed to assess the impact of age (older versus younger) and tattoo status (i.e., no tattoo, feminine tattoo, or masculine tattoo) on three dependent measures: credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity. Older and younger women are perceived differently depending on tattoo status. Not wearing a tattoo may lead to a more favorable perception of older women than wearing one, but wearing a feminine tattoo may engender a more favorable impression of older women than having a masculine tattoo. But not having a tattoo may not be as helpful for the perception of younger women as it is for older women. Also, while younger women may be rewarded for gender role transgression with respect to tattoo status, this is not so for older women.

KEYWORDS
Aging; attractiveness; credibility; gender; social identity theory; tattoos

Introduction
Tattoos are increasingly becoming popular (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2010). Among Americans, 21%, or one in five, today report wearing a tattoo, compared to 16% in 2003 (United Press International [UPI], 2012). Further, the last two decades have seen a surge in women getting tattooed, with women making up approximately 45%–65% of the population acquiring tattoos (Armstrong et al., 2008), and “for the first time, women [are now] more likely to have tattoos at 23 percent compared to 19 percent for men” (UPI, 2012).

Tattoos constitute a visual form of communication; however, the meaning of the tattoo for the wearer may not match with the meanings assigned by viewers. Research on perceptions of a tattooed body has not kept pace with the increasing prevalence of tattoos in society. Previous investigations have compared how college students perceive women and men who are tattooed and also examined the gendered reasons why people get tattoos. Much remains to be understood, however, about how the combination of aging and gender impacts perceptions.

This study seeks to address this deficit in the literature by comparing how undergraduates differently perceive varying types of tattoos on women of different ages. Focusing on college students is especially important because they reflect perspectives of a generation that is most likely to have more liberal views of tattoos. Further, the permanence of tattoos also means that those who choose to get a tattoo must weigh very carefully the decision to tattoo. Much of the literature reviewed in college texts tends to promote abilities to make long-term decisions, as in the case of marital communication or contexts of desensitization. Therefore, issues addressed in this study are of practical benefit to students in the 18–30-year-old age group, who are the most likely to make decisions about whether to tattoo, what to tattoo, and where to tattoo. With nearly one-fifth of all Americans tattooed, this common form of visual communication needs greater understanding.
Additionally, comparing the ways women are perceived with respect to types of tattoos on women of different ages may enhance insights into societal perceptions of women as they age.

To provide a theoretical framework for understanding the gender differences and person perceptions explored herein, social identity theory (Tajfel, 2010) provides a vehicle for examining how people perceive and assign meaning to women of different ages with tattoos. Social categorization is reviewed, followed by a description of the three forms of categorization that constitute the dependent variables for this study: credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity. Attention then turns to a review of research on the independent variables of age and tattoo status.

Social identity theory

Social identity theory involves understanding the individual through processes of social categorization. Tajfel (2010) describes social categorization as an “ordering of social environment in terms of groupings of persons in a manner which makes sense to the individual” (p. 119). This automatic process of assigning a category to people allows us to make social decisions and anticipate another’s behavior. It is a primary sorting function that allows us to differentiate ourselves, maintain our social structure, protect and assert our value system, as well as interpret interaction with others. Though social stereotyping can result from this process, it does not necessarily result in prejudice. Though inferences may commonly have a negative quality, they can also engender positive evaluations (Tajfel 2010).

Any aspect of our person and personality can lead to categorization or stereotyping. However, what makes social identity theory especially useful for understanding the role tattoos play in communication is that though tattooing has become increasingly popular, it remains a nonnormative practice. Consequently, visible tattoos leave viewers prone to engaging in sense-making processes that may invoke certain categories associated with tattoos. To frame our understanding of the dynamics expected to influence the respondents’ perceptions of the women viewed in this study’s experiment, we must first discuss the process of social categorization, the resulting person prototypes, and the possibilities for stigma as they guide our categories.

Hugenberg and Sacco (2008) outlined three steps to social categorization and stereotyping that are useful for examining the perceptions of tattooed women with respect to their age. They argued that the social categorization process relies on rules of category selection, category activation, and category application. While this may seem like a lengthy process, it is actually an almost instantaneous phenomenon involving a split-second thought that simplifies inferences about other people (Willis & Todorov, 2006).

Table 1. Description of sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>n</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
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<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattooed</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages do not all add up to 100 because some respondents did not answer all questions.
Category selection involves the individual’s immediate sorting of potential categories that may apply to the person before him or her, which is based on preconceived notions of “types” of people and the behaviors associated with these categories. Tajfel and Forgas (1981) suggest that such “types” of people are known to observers through experience and socialization. Also called “prototypes,” these preconceived ideas apply to both the observer and the observed and are loosely defined as “fuzzy sets” of information that depend on context and group membership (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). Prototypes include criteria for belonging versus not belonging to a given group or category.

Inferences people make about others are based on these pre-existing categories that are activated by both similarities and differences people observe, with special emphasis on the differences. Because we use this process to understand our social world, any nonnormative experience tends to trigger the need for evaluation and the categorization process. Once the categories have been selected to apply to a particular person or group, they are activated and the related assumptions and expectations applied. Category application “involves attending to and processing the unique characteristics of the individual” and measuring him/her based on his/her “type” and the related grouping of appropriate behaviors and associated meaning (Hugenberg & Sacco, 2008, p. 1054).

Finally, social categorization is the process via which stigma may occur if social norms are violated. Stigma involves someone who bears a negative or spoiled social identity based on the characteristics that the perceiver deems unacceptable (Goffman, 1963). Three types of stigma may be invoked including: (a) abominations of the body; (b) blemishes of individual character; and (c) tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion (Goffman, 1963). Tattooing can be seen as an abomination of the body. Swami and Furnham (2007) found that tattooed women were judged more harshly than tattooed males based on preconceived societal stereotypes.

Physical appearance cues are an important aspect of this study, as impressions are formed almost immediately based solely on physical appearances (Doss & Ebesu Hubbard, 2009). Willis and Todorov (2006) note how quickly judgments are cast, in that impressions are formed within the first 100 milliseconds of exposure. Tattoos are symbols drawn permanently on body parts and as such are subject to instant judgments based on the viewer’s pre-existing attitudes (Seiter & Hatch, 2005). Many tattooed people believe that having a tattoo heightens attractiveness and beauty, but lingering stigmas may result in a negative skew of the intended message (Atkinson, 2002; Seiter & Hatch, 2005; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Along these lines, the present research investigated the extent to which social categorization influences the perceptions of students on women of different ages with tattoos.

**Credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity**

To further the understanding of social perceptions of tattooed women, this study seeks to examine how specific social categories are invoked. This focus yields insight into the social identity ascribed to women with tattoos and possible stereotypes that may be invoked in the categorization process. Though many scholars have studied the perceptions of tattoos by college students, none to date have specifically addressed how college students perceive older women with tattoos. Although some studies (e.g., Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004) compared college students’ perceptions of size of tattoo worn by an individual, it still remains unclear how the perceptions of tattooed bodies vary with regard to age.

Communication research on tattoos has typically focused on factors such as credibility, physical attraction, and promiscuity (Seiter & Hatch, 2005). Credibility is a “complex construct, and is composed of several dimensions including perceptions of a source’s competence, character, composure, sociability, and extroversion” (Seiter, Weger, Merrill, McKenna, & Sanders, 2010, p. 145), which is affected by visible tattoos. For example, Seiter and Hatch’s (2005) study of 148 undergraduates found that both men and women wearing a tattoo led to more negative perceptions of the person. Even though people with tattoos were viewed as less credible in general than those without, they were viewed as more extroverted, which is a common element of credibility.
Resenhoeft, Villa, and Wiseman (2008) replicated Degelman and Price’s (2002) study using two female models: a 24-year-old wearing a black tube top and black pants and a 27-year-old wearing a white sleeveless t-shirt. In both studies, having a tattoo was found to foster negative perceptions with the woman who was tattooed being viewed less positively in her physical appearance (attractiveness) as well as personality traits (caring). Such research suggests that people categorize others differently based on tattoo status.

Though there are divergent studies to support negative and positive views of tattoos, most studies still concur on the preponderance of negative views about women with tattoos. Seiter and Hatch’s (2005) study of both men and women with and without tattoos found that regardless of sex, having a tattoo hurt people’s image more than it helped. However, their study did not support the common belief by tattoo wearers that having a tattoo makes one more attractive (DeMello, 2005; Seiter & Hatch, 2005).

Swami and Furnham (2007) found that women with tattoos were rated as being more promiscuous than women without tattoos. But, no research to date has examined whether the perception of a tattooed woman as promiscuous is in any way impacted by her age.

**Conflicting public perceptions of tattoos**

Despite the increasing popularity of tattoos, existing scholarly and popular literature on perceptions of tattoos vary according to two themes. The themes include viewing tattoos as: (a) positive versus negative expression, and (b) exclusively masculine practice versus shared gender practice.

**Positive versus negative expression**

The perception of tattoos as a positive form of expression includes viewing tattoos as a medium of self-expression and an art form. Proponents of this position emphasize that tattoos have acquired celebrity and star status (DeMello, 1995; Irwin, 2001). Tattoos are not only viewed as an art form, but also as a form of legitimate self-expression (Atkinson, 2002; Degelman & Price, 2002; Doss & Ebesu Hubbard, 2009). Kosut (2006) explains that the music industry uses tattoos as “primary communicative tools” and that “tattooing is . . . being gentrified and repackaged as desirable and hip” (p. 1038). Despite some lingering stigma of tattoos, many women tend to view their tattoos as signifying and memorializing specific events in their lives (Forbes, 2001) and as an expression of individuality (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch, 2002; Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007).

However, there are those who still associate tattoos with stigmatized groups. Goffman (1963) describes stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (p. i). People with tattoos may be negatively perceived and associated with social outcasts (Stuppy, Armstrong, & Casals-Ariet, 1998). Tattooed individuals often are stereotyped as deviant (Adams, 2009; Hawkes et al., 2004) and have long been associated with being of lower class (Bell, 1999); a criminal and a prisoner (Adams, 2009; Atkinson, 2002); a street gang member (Atkinson, 2002); a pervert, psychopath, and prostitute (Forbes, 2001; Seiter & Hatch, 2005); or a rebel (Bell, 1999; Benson, 2000).

**Exclusively masculine practice versus shared gender practice**

Another theme in the literature involves whether tattoos are an exclusively male or shared gender practice. The viewpoint that tattooing is exclusively male behavior stems from a belief that tattoos were designed by and for men and “[have] functioned like a hundred other rituals implicitly designed to keep men together and exclude women” (Braunberger, 2000, p. 4). Tattoos are “permanent, painful, masculine . . .” (DeMello, 2000, p. 13) and are traditionally “associated with masculinity” (Armstrong et al., 2008, p. 879). For men, tattoos are seen as a “badge of courage” or a symbol of their masculinity (Armstrong, 1991).
Enculturated in a patriarchal mode of thinking, women are expected to “modify their bodies for the pleasures of men (i.e., men prefer soft, supple, thin, sexy, unblemished feminine bodies)” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 232). Tattooed women break these rules and tend to be cast as nonconformist (Hawkes et al., 2004).

Although these masculine views of tattooing still exist, tattooing is clearly now a shared practice (Armstrong, 1991). Many women tend to view a tattoo as just another form of jewelry or accessory (Durkin & Houghton, 2000; Sanders, 1989); however, some scholars contend that they are more likely to be seen as socially deviant than their tattooed male counterparts (Bell, 1999; Martin & Dula, 2010). If a woman does choose to get tattooed, gender norms dictate an appropriate tattoo design. Generally, women choose smaller and more feminine tattoos with thin wavy lines, such as flowers and unicorns (Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999) rather than the larger, more aggressive tattoos with thick straighter lines such as dragons, daggers, and tribal tattoos that are more commonly chosen by men (Atkinson, 2002).

The perception of tattoos as shared gender activity can be further differentiated by the actual placement on the body. Men generally choose to place their tattoos on a visible location, either their arms (biceps) or chests (Keinlen, 2011; Sanders, 1989, 1991). In contrast, given the negative views of women with tattoos, women will generally have their first tattoo placed on unexposed parts of their bodies, such as the lower back, hips, and upper portion of the back area (Armstrong, 1991; Sanders, 1989, 1991).

**Age-appropriate appearance**

As noted, tattoos on women traditionally have constituted a violation of gender roles. Little is known, however about perceptions of tattooed women and the aging process. Western society in general places enormous value on youth and beauty and disparages aging. Societal views on older women are much harsher than on older men, and the social worth of a woman is often linked directly to her age. While a man with gray hair may be viewed as gracefully attractive, a woman with graying hair is more likely viewed as old. Garner (1999) avers that “women lose their social value simply by growing old” (p. 4). Ageism affects the perceptions of women more so than men, leading to increased discrimination toward older women. As noted by Trethewey (2001), by age 45, many women face subemployment and are likely to have peaked in their financial earnings.

Clarke and Miller (2002) found that people’s evaluation of bodily appearance of others is mostly based on what society deems appropriate for their age group. A contemporary analogue to the perception of tattooed bodies can be seen in the media outrage over past Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s hairstyle (Givhan, 2010). Fashion is yet another area where older women struggle against societal norms that favor youthfulness, with older women who try to fit in often seen as violating norms of aging (Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011).

These thoughts about middle-aged women may parallel those about aging women with tattoos: If an older woman is judged so harshly according to her hair color or length, then it is likely she will be judged in a similar manner on a tattoo that she wears. If tattoos lead to negative impressions of those wearing them, they could precipitate undesirable outcomes for the tattooed individuals (e.g., while applying for jobs). This may be amplified for older women who already face other forms of discrimination such as ageism and sexism. Based on previous research claiming that tattoos, particularly masculine ones, are deemed more deviant, combined with the research suggesting more constrained evaluations of older women’s modes of presentation, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: *The younger model will receive a higher credibility rating in the “no tattoo” status than in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status.*

H1b: *The older model will receive a higher credibility rating in the “no tattoo” status than in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status.*
H2a: *The younger model will receive a higher credibility rating in feminine tattoo status than in masculine tattoo status.*

H2b: *The older model will receive a higher credibility rating in feminine tattoo status than in masculine tattoo status.*

The hypotheses stem from the expectation that the categorization of people as deviant, particularly in the case of older women, would not be deemed highly credible.

Further, social identity theory and gender roles literature suggest that to be categorized as an “attractive woman,” one would have to in some ways conform to norms of femininity. Tattoos, the literature suggests, are still largely deemed at odds with the norms of femininity. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3a: *The younger female model will receive a higher attractiveness rating in the “no tattoo” status than in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status.*

H3b: *The older female model will receive a higher attractiveness rating in the “no tattoo” status than in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status.*

H4a: *The younger female model will receive a higher attractiveness rating in feminine tattoo status than in masculine tattoo status.*

H4b: *The older female model will receive a higher attractiveness rating in feminine tattoo status than in masculine tattoo status.*

Tattoos, particularly masculine ones, at odds with perceptions of femininity, may cause observers to deem the tattooed woman as less attractive.

Finally, consistent with Swami and Furnham’s (2007) research, which found that tattooed women were viewed as more promiscuous than women with no tattoos, we seek to extend those findings based on both tattoo type and age of tattoo wearer. We anticipate that more negative evaluations and categorizations will accompany larger, more masculine tattoos. Thus, we hypothesize:

H5a: *The younger female model will receive a higher promiscuousness rating in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status than in the “no tattoo” status.*

H5b: *The older female model will receive a higher promiscuousness rating in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status than in the “no tattoo” status.*

H6a: *The younger female model will receive a higher promiscuousness rating in masculine tattoo status than in feminine tattoo status.*

H6b: *The older female model will receive a higher promiscuousness rating in masculine tattoo status than in feminine tattoo status.*

Perceptions of deviance can be a trigger for stigmatizing categorizations. The literature on tattoos consistently suggests that tattoos retain elements of stigma. Literature on aging suggests that older women are subject to more rigid expectations for conformity. Therefore, this study tests whether tattoo type and age of woman tattooed serves as a basis for more negative evaluations.

**Methodology**

**Design**

This study sought to compare how undergraduate college students perceived a “younger” woman (23 years old) and an “older” woman (48 years old). The study utilized a quantitative 2 (age: older versus younger) × 3 (tattoo status: without a tattoo versus feminine tattoo versus masculine tattoo) between-subjects experimental design to gather data on how tattooed women of different ages are perceived by undergraduate college students. Thus, the two independent categorical variables used in the study were age of female model (two levels: younger model versus older...
model) and tattoo status of female model (three levels: no tattoo, feminine tattoo, and masculine tattoo). Initially, four dependent continuous variables were employed in the study: credibility, likability, attractiveness, and promiscuity. However, likability was dropped because it registered a higher than moderate correlation with credibility (.91). Cronbach reliability alphas for the two composite dependent variables were extremely high: credibility (.97) and attractiveness (.99).

**Procedure**

Upon obtaining their informed consent, 376 randomly assigned undergraduate students enrolled in communication classes at a southeastern university were surveyed using Survey Monkey. While some students were given extra credit for their participation, others were not compensated in any way.

Prior to launching a pilot study, six tattoo artists were interviewed. The artists were shown pictures of each model with a tattoo and asked to define whether the tattoos were masculine or feminine. They concurred that the flower tattoo used in this study was feminine, while the tribal tattoo used in this study was masculine. The artists further described feminine tattoos as “thin and wavy lines,” while stating that masculine tattoos generally have “thicker, bolder, and straighter lines.”

A pilot study was conducted on a class of 19 students (not included in the results of the study) to identify and address potential problems that might occur during the actual survey. For example, one question included in the survey asked respondents to estimate the age of the model shown in the photograph, and this information was used to ensure that the age description of the models provided in the actual survey generally corresponded with the respondents’ perceptions.

The stimuli consisted of a total of six color photographs. There were three photographs of each of the two models (younger and older looking), with both assuming the same pose and wearing a white t-shirt and jeans against identical lighting and background. The models used were chosen because of their similarity in height, weight, hair length, and body type. Also, that models looked their estimated age was corroborated by the pilot study referenced earlier. Of the three photos of each model used, one photo was of the model (either younger or older) without a tattoo, the second photo was of the same model with a feminine tattoo (flower—thin and wavy lines), and the third photo showed each model with a large masculine tattoo (tribal—thick and straighter lines). The tattoos were digitally inserted on the photographs. 376 students completed the survey.

While 65 participants saw a photo of the older woman without a tattoo, another 63 students were presented with another photo showing the older woman with a feminine tattoo. The last 68 students in this category saw a photograph of the older woman with a masculine tattoo. Conversely, a different group of 54 students observed a picture identical in composition but of a younger-looking woman without a tattoo, while another 69 students saw a variation of the same photo with the model wearing a feminine tattoo, and the last 58 students in this category saw the younger woman with a masculine tattoo.

**Measures**

The following previously tested measures were employed in this study. Pre-existing attitudes toward tattoos were measured by Swami and Furnham’s (2007) binomial scale: “Do you have any tattoos? If so, how many? If no, would you consider having a tattoo in future?”

Credibility was operationalized using 15-item 7-point Likert scales (1 = very strongly agree to 7 = very strongly disagree) designed by McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner (1974), highlighting five separate dimensions: competence (Cronbach alpha of .72), character (Cronbach alpha of .75), social ability (Cronbach alpha of .70), extraverssion (Cronbach alpha of .77), and composure (Cronbach alpha of .71). Physical attractiveness was measured using a subscale of Reysen’s (2005) likability 7-point Likert-type scale: “This person is physically attractive” (1 = very strongly disagree; 7 = very strongly agree). Likability and promiscuity was tapped using 9-point Likert scale used by Swami and
Furnham (2007): “How sexually promiscuous do you think this woman is?” (1 = not at all; 9 = very). The last section of the survey asked participants to indicate demographic details including sex, age, race/ethnicity, and college classification.

**Results**

**Sample**

As Table 1 indicates, of the total of 376 respondents, 236 (62.8%) were female, while 133 (35.4%) were male. A majority (165; 43.69%) of the students were freshmen, followed by sophomores (93; 24.7%), juniors (78; 20.7%), and seniors (31; 8.2%). The ethnic composition of the students was predominately Caucasian (246; 65.6%), followed by Latinos (56; 14.9%), African Americans (30; 8%), Asians (25; 6.6%), Native Indian (1; .3%), Pacific Island (1; .3%), and others (10; 2.7%). The majority of the respondents did not have tattoos: 276 (73.4%) versus 93 (24.7%) that had tattoos. Of the 276 (73.4%) who did not have tattoos, 78 (20.7%) said they would consider getting a tattoo, while 118 (31.4%) said they would not consider getting a tattoo, and 80 (21.3%) were not sure if they would get a tattoo.

**Data analysis**

First, data were subjected to a two-way multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). This test was considered appropriate given the association among the dependent variables (see Table 2). As Table 3 indicates, the MANCOVA was significant: Wilks’ Lambda for age = .798, $F(3, 358) = 30.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .20$; tattoo status = .851, $F(6, 716) = 10.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$; interaction of age and tattoo status = .883, $F(6, 716) = 7.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$. Because the underlying assumption of homogenous covariance was not met, as evidenced by a significant Box’s $M$ test ($499.255$, $p < .001$), Pillai’s Trace, which is robust to this violation (see Finch, 2005; Olson, 1974, 1976, 1979), was invoked as a failsafe: Pillai’s Trace for age = .202, $F(3, 358) = 30.171$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .20$; tattoo status = .151, $F(6, 718) = 9.738$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$; and interaction of age and tattoo status = .120, $F(6, 718) = 7.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$.

Second, univariate analyses were conducted in order to identify interaction effects of the independent variables. Tables 4–6 indicate that except for the relationship between tattoo status and promiscuity, both age and tattoo status were significantly linked to each of the three dependent variables (i.e., credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity). Results of hypotheses that guided the study are presented next, based on Bonferroni post hoc analysis interaction effects for each category of age model.

**Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b (Credibility)**

Hypothesis 1a predicting higher credibility ratings for the younger model in the “no tattoo” status than in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status was partially supported. Whereas wearing no tattoo ($M = 4.48$) was rated as more credible than wearing a feminine tattoo ($M = 3.45$), it was not significantly different from wearing masculine one (see Table 7). However, Hypothesis 1b speculating that credibility ratings for the older model would be higher in the “no tattoo” status than

<table>
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<th>Credibility</th>
<th>Likeability</th>
<th>Promiscuity</th>
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<td>Credibility</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeability</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>−.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuity</td>
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<td>.72</td>
</tr>
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</table>

$p < .001$.
in either feminine tattoo status or masculine tattoo status was fully supported. Having no tattoo ($M = 4.85$) was significantly linked to a higher level of credibility than having a feminine tattoo ($M = 4.26$) or masculine tattoo ($M = 3.16$) (see Table 8).

Hypothesis 2a predicting higher credibility ratings for the younger model in feminine tattoo status than in the masculine tattoo status was not supported. The difference between displaying a feminine tattoo and a masculine was not significant in terms of credibility (see Table 8). But Hypothesis 2b speculating that credibility ratings would be higher for the older model with a feminine rather than masculine tattoo was supported. Having a feminine tattoo ($M = 4.26$) was significantly associated with a higher level of credibility than having a masculine tattoo ($M = 3.16$) (see Table 8).

**Hypotheses 3a, 3, 4a, and 4b (Attractiveness)**

In terms of attractiveness, Hypothesis 3a predicting a higher rating for the younger model in the “no tattoo” status when compared to either feminine or masculine status was only partially supported. Whereas having no tattoo ($M = 4.32$) was rated higher than wearing a feminine tattoo ($M = 3.55$), there was no significant difference between not wearing a tattoo and wearing a masculine tattoo (see Table 7).
However, Hypothesis 3b speculating a higher attractiveness rating for the older model in the “no tattoo” status when compared to either wearing a feminine or masculine tattoo was fully supported. Having no tattoo ($M = 4.00$) was rated significantly higher than having a feminine tattoo ($M = 3.21$) or a masculine one ($M = 2.38$). Having a feminine tattoo was also rated as more attractive than a masculine one.

Hypothesis 4a predicting a higher rating for the younger model in feminine tattoo status as opposed to masculine tattoo status was contradicted. Surprisingly, having a masculine tattoo ($M = 4.17$) was rated significantly higher than having feminine one ($M = 3.55$). However, Hypothesis 4b speculating a higher attractiveness rating for the older model in feminine tattoo status when compared to masculine tattoo status was supported. Having a feminine tattoo status ($M = 3.21$) was rated as more attractive than having a masculine one ($M = 2.38$).

**Hypotheses 5a, 5b, 6a, and 6b (Promiscuity)**

Hypothesis 5a predicting a higher promiscuity rating for the younger model in either feminine or masculine tattoo status when compared to a “no tattoo” status was supported, but only partially.

### Table 7. Bonferroni pairwise comparisons of younger model’s credibility, promiscuity, and attractiveness by tattoo status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>IV (Tattoo status level) &amp; mean</th>
<th>Mean difference (p levels in parentheses)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>No tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>4.48 3.45 1.03 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.48 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>3.86 .62 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>3.45 3.86 -.41 (.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuity</td>
<td>No Tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>4.50 6.03 -1.54 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.50 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>5.12 -.62 (.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>6.03 5.12 .92 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>No tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>4.32 3.55 .78 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.32 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>4.17 .15 (.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>3.55 4.17 -.63 (.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 8. Bonferroni pairwise comparisons of older model’s credibility, promiscuity, and attractiveness by tattoo status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>IV (Tattoo status level) &amp; mean</th>
<th>Mean difference (p levels in parentheses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>No tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>4.85 4.26 .59 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.85 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>3.16 1.69 (.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>4.26 3.16 1.10 (.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuity</td>
<td>No Tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>5.12 4.67 -.44 (.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.12 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>5.88 -.76 (.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>4.67 5.88 1.20 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>No tattoo Feminine tattoo</td>
<td>4.00 3.21 .78 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.00 Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>2.38 1.61 (.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminine tattoo Masculine tattoo</td>
<td>3.21 2.38 .832 (.001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whereas wearing a feminine tattoo ($M = 6.03$) was rated significantly higher in promiscuity than having no tattoo ($M = 4.50$), there was no significant difference between not wearing a tattoo and wearing a masculine one. However, Hypothesis 5b suggesting a higher promiscuity rating for the older model in either the feminine or masculine tattoo status was not supported. Having either a feminine or masculine tattoo was not rated differently than wearing no tattoo.

Hypothesis 6a promising a higher promiscuity rating for the younger model with a masculine tattoo versus a feminine one was not supported. There was no significant difference between wearing these types of tattoos. However, Hypothesis 6b speculating a higher promiscuity rating for the older model wearing a masculine tattoo when compared to a feminine one was supported. Possessing a masculine tattoo ($M = 5.88$) was rated higher in promiscuity than having a feminine one ($M = 4.67$).

### Influence of subjects’ gender and tattoo history

Two additional MANCOVAs were performed to examine the effect of subjects’ gender and tattoo history respectively on the three dependent variables. However, the results were not statistically significant.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to determine the relationship between a woman’s age and tattoo status (i.e., no tattoo, feminine tattoo, or masculine tattoo) and the way in which she is categorized by measuring college students’ perceptions of a woman’s credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity. The results suggest that older and younger women are perceived differently depending on whether they are wearing a feminine tattoo, masculine tattoo, or no tattoo at all. This study provides evidence to support a conclusion that the tattoo status of older versus younger women is related to perceptions of the woman’s credibility, attractiveness, and promiscuity as a whole. Subsequent univariate analyses also revealed that tattoo status of older versus younger woman was associated with each one of these three perception categories. Even more specifically, pairwise comparisons of the tattoo status of both older and younger women in terms of the three perception categories revealed differences between the two models.

This study echoes Swami and Furnham’s (2007) concerns about the effects of tattooing on stereotypes assigned to people. Social categorization theory helps to interpret these data. When viewing an older woman, college students perceived her as more credible both without a tattoo and with the feminine status tattoo, but there was a significant decrease ($p = .000$) in the perception of her credibility when she exhibited the masculine tattoo. In this case, an older woman violating expectations associated with her gender produces a negative assessment of credibility. It appears that the person prototype held by young viewers toward older women is one in which conformity is expected. Tendencies to deviate from those gender norms produce more negative perceptions that can be stigmatizing.

In contrast to this, the younger woman was viewed as most credible when not wearing a tattoo, but no difference was found in credibility when she wore the feminine or masculine tattoo. Again, even among their own peers, credibility may be diminished by visible tattoos, although once the norm has been violated, the extent of the violation did not appear to be guided by the same kind of rigid person prototype.

The results also show the older woman was perceived as most attractive when not exhibiting a tattoo compared to feminine tattoo and the masculine tattoo. However, the older woman was perceived as more attractive when wearing a feminine tattoo versus the masculine tattoo. This suggests that older women are perceived as most attractive when they do not have a tattoo, but if they do choose to have a tattoo then a feminine tattoo is deemed more attractive than the masculine tattoo.
There is an interesting difference revealed between the older and younger woman’s attractiveness measures as the younger woman, while she was also found most attractive without a tattoo when compared to the feminine tattoo and masculine tattoo, the younger woman was instead rated as more attractive with the masculine tattoo over the feminine one. It was noted earlier than one category associated with having a tattoo is that of a “rebel” (Bell, 1999; Benson, 2000). The data suggest that the younger woman could more readily be seen as more attractive when acting as a rebel than the older woman could.

Finally, the older woman was evaluated as less promiscuous when she was either not wearing a tattoo or has the feminine tattoo. In fact, there was no significant difference between not having a tattoo and a feminine tattoo status for this measure. The perception of the older woman’s promiscuity does become significant for the masculine tattoo when compared to either the feminine option or the nontattooed status. The degree of violation from the person prototype appears to play a role in the assessment of promiscuity by the viewers.

The promiscuity measure provides further interesting results. While the older woman was found more promiscuous with the masculine tattoo versus the feminine tattoo, the younger woman was perceived as more promiscuous with the feminine tattoo versus without a tattoo. Given the increasing prevalence of tattoos among young women, viewers may be more attuned to more-nuanced rules of category selection when examining youthful peers. A bolder, masculine tattoo might be seen as making a statement, thus enhancing her perceived attractiveness. The feminine tattoo may be viewed by peers more as accessory (Durkin & Houghton, 2000; Sanders, 1989) meant to appear attractive and attract male suitors.

While both women in the study were rewarded with more credibility and attractiveness, and were perceived as less promiscuous when they did not wear tattoos, this is where much of the similarity ends. In the case of tattoos, the results indicate that older women are expected to conform to feminine expression standards, and that perception of them may suffer if they express themselves in masculine ways. It appears that on some level, younger women may be rewarded for breaking the gender norm by their own peers. Collectively, these results suggest a dichotomy of public perceptions regarding tattoos as they relate to age of wearer.

It seems, based on the findings, that different types of category selection, activation, and application are taking place. For the older woman, the category selection of “middle-aged woman” may not be seen as fitting so neatly with another label, such as “rebel.” Further, for an older woman who is already likely be deemed less attractive, efforts to accessorize with a tattoo, whether masculine or feminine, can be seen as inappropriate for that age group. The previously cited work on ageism suggests that older women bear a greater burden to gracefully conform to gender-based expectations, whether through hair, fashion or, in this case, tattoos.

These data offer insight into gender communication and aging because they point to the differing standards involved in the older versus younger woman’s prototypes when it comes to what is perceived as attractive. Is the younger woman less attractive because of the overt expression of femininity? If so, it may be that the assertive (masculine) nature of getting tattooed puts the feminine tattoo on this younger woman into a kind of contempt category, making her appear inappropriately sexual and therefore less attractive and more promiscuous. This is interesting because it may be that the masculine nature of the tattoo somehow negates the negative perception of promiscuity just as the feminine tattoo seems to enhance it. It may also be that the masculine tattoo makes the younger woman appear to be outside of what is feminine and therefore nonsexual and nonthreatening. It is suggested that this experiment be repeated with the addition of a qualitative component so more light is shed on these findings.

The data provide potentially useful information for undergraduates who are considering getting tattoos. For those who assume that much of the negative perceptions of tattoos have dissipated over time, these data derived from a generation that has been widely exposed to tattooing as a form of self-expression continue to perceive tattoos more negatively. Further, as these young adults age, the deviance from gender norms that may be affirmed by their generational cohort may prompt biases.
from members of subsequent generational cohorts. The interest here is not to discourage tattooing but to provide information about the communicative impact of tattooing that young adults may want to factor into their decisions about whether to tattoo, what to tattoo, and where to place the tattoos on their bodies.

The study had some limitations. For example, while the study focuses on publicly visible tattoos, previous studies have shown that most women have their tattoos on a location of the body that can be concealed (Armstrong, 1991). Also, although the primary purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the younger demographic, the absence of a sample of older adults deprives readers of a comparison of younger and older respondents. It would be helpful to know if older participants are as restrictive in their person prototypes for older women as the younger population. Further, the data in this study were limited by the demographic and geographic context of the university where the study was conducted. The university is located in a warm climate where the students might be more naturally accepting of body art as they are exposed to more flesh (i.e., beach sports and summer attire) than their counterparts in a northern region.

The placement of the tattoo on the model is yet another limitation. We used only one body part to emphasize the tattoo, albeit, a prominent location. The influence of expansion of tattooed body parts warrants further investigation.

To date, there has not been a study that compares older tattooed women and younger tattooed women. Previous studies have shown that college students tend to be more accepting of tattoos than their older counterparts (Armstrong, 1991); however, the results of this study show that students tend to be accepting of tattoos on younger women but less so regarding older women. Given that tattoos are permanent, the undergraduates’ views may change as they begin to age. It is also clear that the dynamics involved in how we categorize women of different ages are complex and unique to not only the differing age groups but also the differing perspectives and contexts involved. Future research should continue to explore the many ways women, age, and tattoos intersect.

References


