

# **INKredible memories:**

## Tattoos as an expression of the narrative identity of emerging adults

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#### **Aim of this Research Study**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe how emerging adults express their narrative identity through tattoos.

#### **Background and Context**

- Tattooing is a tradition that is almost as old as humanity itself (Bell, 1999; Berg, Jordaan, Lombaard, Naudé, & van Zyl, 2017; Genis, 2014, Lombaard & Bergh, 2014).
- All bodies tell a narrative, but the tattooed body's unique articulation communicates a more distinctly personal narrative (Kosut, 2000).
- Tattoos are living and breathing embodiments of the individual's autobiography.

#### **Theoretical framework**

Narrative identity theory and autobiographical reasoning (McAdams, 2013)



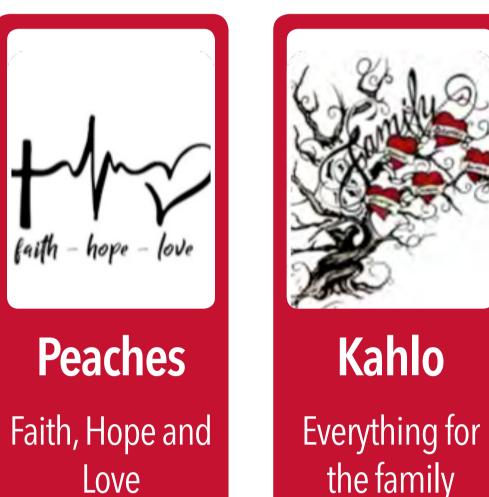
#### Results

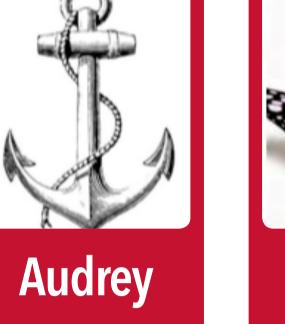
Love

"I can see how

these words

define me."





In memory of

my grandfather

"In memoriam

of my

grandfather. The

person I hope to

one day be."



Ally

Different

phases of life

I have been

through"



Blair Birds of a feather

"My tattoos to "... they're me resemble [sparrows *different phases* are] birds of vigilance and or...things that creativity and that linked with me as an artist."



going on

"I have that

*reminder about* 

my sister and

what I went

through after

losing her."



*"Almost any* 

situation I

*remember that* 

it's everything

for the family."

Frank

beautiful

*"It's basically* 

my granddad's

handwriting,

and he wrote

in Italian:

life is always

beautiful."









Recall

Meaningmaking

Integrate

• Place events into chronological order • Draw conclusions about the self

• Integrate the events and their meaning into the ever evolving narrative identity

#### **Research Methods**

**Paradigm:** Social constructionism. **Approach:** Qualitative.

**Design:** Explorative and descriptive.

**Participants:** 10 emerging adults between the ages of 20 and 27 years from various ethnocultural groupings.

**Data collection:** Reflective writing exercise and individual interviews. **Analytic strategies:** Thematic analysis, guided by the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006)





life



Kai

Judging a book

Reese Lennon Closing of a A song about chapter

*"my tattoo was* "I started with to symbolise a *music at the* closing of that age of four, so it went a bit about chapter in my my life."

by its cover "I wanted to give them a hint that inside the book is not the same as the

cover shows."

Affiliation: Being part of the pack The best of times; the worst of times Tattoo narratives focused on the bond with family or Some tattoos commemorated lost loved ones; others reminded of hard times or of great adventures *bigger groups* 

life."

**Salient Themes** 

Out with the old;

in with the new

#### **Interview Schedule**

Examples of questions

- What does identity mean to you?
- Do you feel that tattoos are part of your identity?
- If someone should look at you and your tattoos at first glance, what is the message you want to convey to them through your tattoos?
- Tell me about your tattoos and the stories they tell.
- Tell me about the meaning of your first tattoo.
- Do you have a favourite tattoo? Tell me about the meaning behind it.
- How does that meaning connect to your life story?
- Do you feel that some, or all, of your tattoos express parts of your life story?
- Do you feel tattoos interfere with other parts of your identity?

#### Participants reflected upon bad events in order to help them grow

Live and Learn

#### Reactions from others neccesitated reflection on self, relationships, religion and culture

### In Conclusion

- The new-found independence found during emerging adulthood provides participants with the freedom to get tattooed, but also with the need to highlight their connection to a family or group.
- The most prominent purpose of tattoos was to underline membership to a significant other, a family, or a larger group with whom the life narratives are shared.
- Participants explored and changed their own cultural views and religious beliefs, due to the interest in, feedback from, and conflict with others due to their tattoos.
- Autobiographical reasoning was employed positive and negative life events are remembered and expressed through tattoos. The retelling of stories from one's life typifies a meaning making process that forms the basis of narrative identity.