

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)




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


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?


Results




Peaches
Faith, Hope and Love
"I can see how these words define me."




Kahlo
Everything for the family
"Almost any situation I remember that it's everything for the family."




Audrey
In memory of my grandfather
"In memoriam of my grandfather. The person I hope to one day be."




Ally
Different phases of life
"My tattoos to me resemble different phases or... things that I have been through"




Blair
Birds of a feather
"... they're [sparrows are] birds of vigilance and creativity and that linked with me as an artist."




Zama
Life keeps going on
"I have that reminder about my sister and what I went through after losing her."




Frank
Life is always beautiful
"It's basically my granddad's handwriting, and he wrote in Italian: life is always beautiful."



Reese
Closing of a chapter
"my tattoo was to symbolise a closing of that chapter in my life."



Lennon
A song about life
"I started with music at the age of four, so it went a bit about my life."



Kai
Judging a book 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
Tattoo narratives focused on the bond with family or bigger groups

The best of times; the worst of times
Some tattoos commemorated lost loved ones; others reminded of hard times or of great adventures

Salient Themes

Live and Learn
Participants reflected upon bad events in order to help them grow

Out with the old; in with the new
Reactions from others necessitated 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.