

The Psychology of Body Art and Academic Success

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Abstract

Historically it seems that there has been a social stigma associated with body art, specifically tattoos, and the individual's academic performance. This study seeks to better understand the relationship between individuals who have tattoos and their academic performance. The hypothesis states that college students at a midwestern university that have tattoos will have a lower grade point average than those without tattoos. Ninety-four students from a midwestern university participated in the study by completing a 20-item questionnaire. The purpose of this paper is to present how overtime body art has become more socially acceptable but that individuals with body art do have lower academic success than those without and that they could perform more disobedient behavior.

Keywords: body art, academic success, tattoos

The Psychology of Body Art and Academic Success

Some may argue that there is a social stigma against individuals with body art in today's society but that does not seem to be the case anymore (Fisher, 2002). Some captivating evidence explains that the youth or younger generations are more accepting of tattoos than of the older generation (Porcella, 2009). In order to comprehend why society is becoming more accepting of individuals with body art we must first look at how many people have tattoos. In a random sample completed in 2006 it was discovered that 24% of the respondents had tattoos (Laumann & Derick, 2006). This evidence may help explain the reason for such a sudden approval in body art because individuals who have tattoos are found to be more accepting of them. According to a study done in 2008 college students in general were very accepting of other students' beliefs (Landry, 2008).

Body art in relation to college students

In today's society body art seems to be highly correlated with individuals that are at the college age and slightly older. Therefore it would be beneficial to look at the research of body art in relation with college aged students. One study determined that the higher the individual's GPA the lesser tolerance they had of getting a tattoo or piercing (Dale, 2007). This experiment also concluded that the "attitude of employers hiring individuals with tattoos was split almost evenly with half saying that they should not discriminate towards them and the other half saying they should not hire them" (Dale, 2007). Students at a Christian College did not view that the Bible specifically forbade tattoos and that even in certain translations of the Bible it does not even state the word tattoo (Firmin et. al., 2008). Also, the participants within this study that had tattoos stated that they gave deep thought to the design of the tattoo before they got it (Firmin et. al., 2008). One university wanted to examine the number of students with body modifications

and they concluded that roughly 23% had tattoos (Mayers et. al., 2002). They also found that there was no significant difference in the sex of the individuals obtaining a tattoo but that male athletes were more likely to get a tattoo than male non-athletes (Mayers et. al., 2002). Another set of college students were found to have tattoos because they helped to express themselves better and made them feel independent (Armstrong et. al., 2004). One university in Wisconsin found out that their students did not have negative perceptions of tattoos but understood that their tattoos may prevent them from obtaining a job in the future (Pauli et. al., 2009). Another study discovered that women were more accepting of tattoos and piercings on men than men were and that college students in general were very accepting of other students' beliefs (Landry, 2008).

Academic success and the qualities of a “good student”

Academic performance is one key component within this research experiment because the study is the difference between individuals with tattoos or without tattoos and their academic success. Therefore it would be beneficial to comprehend what makes up a “good student” and how it can be related to body art. One study related academic success and hope to determine the likelihood of that individual graduating from college and the level of their GPA. They concluded that the higher level of hope a person has their greater chance of graduating and the greater the GPA (Snyder et. al., 2002). This explains that one factor that makes up a good student would be a high level of hope. Evidence has also shown that there is not a significant relationship between body modification and grade point averages (Krell, 2003). Although this study determined that there is not relationship between the two does not mean that this is true for all experiments because they researched all body modifications rather than only tattoos.

How body art is influenced

To determine how an individual that has tattoos makes decisions one must first understand how that person was influenced especially when receiving their body art. So, it would be useful to clarify why they were motivated to get a tattoo. In a study involving soldiers they were asked different questions about where and when they got their tattoo. The soldiers also mentioned that “peer pressure, or friends were the biggest influence of acquiring the tattoo” (Gadd, 1992).

Another experiment explained that body modifications, or tattoos, can influence one’s psyche or soma and that their choices are reflections of cultural traditions (Albin, 2006). In this specific case study an individuals who had multiple personalities acquired a tattoo because both personalities felt the need to change their body. In the experiment involving Christian students it was determined that friends were more influential of obtaining tattoos than family members (Firmin et. al., 2008).

Body art and the relation to social stigmas and deviance

A study done in 2010 determined that individuals with tattoos were more likely to engage in deviant behaviors such as cheating on college work, binge drinking, and having had multiple sex partners in the course of their lifetime (Koch et. al., 2010). One experiment that was done determined that individuals who looked at defendants with facial tattoos showed more anxiety than when looking at defendants without tattoos (Knight, 2010). This could be correlated with the fact that defendants may have already participated in deviant behavior and that individual is associated the deviant behavior with the tattoo. Researchers also studied the relationship of individuals with or without tattoos and stigmas against tattoos. They found their relevant hypothesis to be true that individuals with tattoos have significantly lower stigmas against tattoos (Martin & Dula, 2010). Another study examined if females were less likely to approach an

individual with a tattoo no matter the race. The results showed that a participant with a tattoo was more likely to approach someone with a tattoo and it also showed that race was an issue within the study because they were less likely to approach the African American male with tattoos than the Caucasian male with tattoos (Potts, 2010). One experiment examined how body modifications, or tattoos, are correlated with misconduct. They determined that the three personality traits that they recorded in a questionnaire played independent roles in guessing control of cultural deviant markers and that the relationship between body modification and misconduct is false (Nathanson et. al., 2005).

Hypothesis and Operationalized Variables

The following independent variable, tattoos or no tattoos, will be measured by self-reported test items stating whether or not the individual has body art. The dependent variable (grade point average) will be measured through self-reporting of their GPA and a questionnaire with the qualities of a good student. The hypothesis states that individuals with tattoos have a lower GPA than those without tattoos.

Method

Participants

Ninety-five students from a midwestern university participated in the study; they did not receive any class credit or reward of any kind. One individual did not report their grade point average so their data was not included. Therefore, 94 participants' data are considered in the data analysis. Breakdown of the 94 who reported gender was as follows: 33% males and 67% females. Breakdown of the 94 participants who reported tattoos was as follows: 43% had tattoos and 57% did not have tattoos. Data were collected in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Materials

A 20-item questionnaire was compiled using demographic and questions about attitudes toward tattoos and the qualities of a good student. The questionnaire used most of the items on the Sample Academic Achievement Measures Compiled by RMC Research Corporation, Denver. Items included statements such as, “I like being at school”, “I like school work best when it is challenging,” and “I think that the things I am learning in school will be important in my future”. Three original items measured self-reported levels of tattoos and their attitudes towards the subject such as, “If you have a tattoo is it visible?”, “What kind of tattoos do you have?”, and “Do you believe there is a stigma in your community associated with tattoos?”. The questionnaire was scored on a seven point Likert scale with one meaning strongly disagree and seven strongly agree.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the 20-item questionnaire during class time or in the dining halls. The researcher explained the general goal of the study and explicitly stated that the object of the study was not to judge anyone on their opinions but to gain a better understanding of attitudes towards individuals with tattoos. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, if they became overly uncomfortable. Participants were informed verbally and in written instruction that all responses were anonymous. The completion of the survey took no longer than 10 minutes for the participants to complete. After completion of the surveys, the experimenter debriefed the participants and answered any questions regarding the research study.

Results

There was one independent variable (tattoos or no tattoos) and one dependent variable (grade point average). To test the hypothesis that individuals with tattoos have a lower grade point average than those without tattoos an Independent Samples T-test was performed. Results indicated the independent samples t-test analysis comparing grade point averages for individuals with tattoos and individuals without tattoos indicated that tattooed individuals' grade point averages ($M=3.17$, $SD=0.44$) did differ significantly from non-tattooed individuals' grade point averages ($M=3.49$, $SD=0.45$), $t(92)=-3.544$, $p=.001$. Following this format, a table containing the above information of the Independent Samples T-test was included in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Other Findings:

Another Independent Samples T-test was performed to determine if males or females had a significantly higher grade point average than the other gender. The independent samples t-test analysis comparing grade point average for males and females indicated that female grade point averages ($M=3.34$, $SD=0.46$) did not differ significantly from male grade point averages ($M=3.38$, $SD=0.51$), $t(92)=0.349$, $p=.728$. In other words, although males had a higher grade point average than females it was not a significant difference.

Analysis was also done to determine if there was a difference between grade point averages of males with tattoo and females with tattoos. The mean grade point average for females with tattoos was 3.20 and for males with tattoos the mean grade point average was 3.17. In other words, females with tattoos did have a higher grade point average than males with tattoos but the results were not significant enough to make a difference.

Discussion

The original hypothesis stated: College students at a midwestern institution with tattoos will have a lower grade point average than those without tattoos. Because there were significant results for the statement above the original hypothesis was supported. However, after looking at grade point average between males and females the results showed that there was not a significant difference between the two variables. Also, although females with tattoos had a higher grade point average than males with tattoos there was not a significant difference to support that females with tattoos have a higher grade point average than males with tattoos.

Limitations

If this study is repeated in the future, there are a few alterations that would improve the quality of the results. First, the sample size was small during this experiment, if this study was to be repeated the sample size should be increased for more validity and reliability. Also, the quality of the original survey questions can be improved. In the present survey, participants were asked how they felt about school and their attitudes toward learning. Instead of asking participants to answer these types of statements the questions should be changed to include more academic performance issues. An individual may perform well in school but may not enjoy it and these questions were more about how they perceived school and if they took pleasure in their classes.

Implications

In the future, this project can help further the search of attitudes towards individuals with body art and how they perform academically. Further research may include the reason why the individual obtained the tattoo. Also, many individuals had included on their survey that although they did not have a tattoo at the moment they had considered getting a form of body art. This may be interesting to add in the next survey to see if they are fully against the idea of obtaining a

tattoo or if they have considered the idea. Another way to help in further research would be to add if religion has an influence on if an individual would get a tattoo or not. The results of this study indicated that although individuals may be becoming more supportive of body art those that have tattoos have a lower grade point average than those without tattoos.

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