

Beyond Skin Deep: Exploring the Motivations, Stigma, and Cultural Significance of Tattoos in the Professional World

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the reasons people get tattooed, the lingering societal prejudice regarding body art, and its impact on careers in the Philippines. Applying a phenomenological framework, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and online surveys with professionals who have tattoos, human resource (HR) practitioners, as well as college students. Results indicate that while younger individuals perceive tattoos more as self-expression than ever before, professional stigma is still highly prevalent in conservative sectors. This research rests on Andrea Salvini's (2010) Symbolic Interaction Theory, Mitchell Green's (2010) Self-Expression Theory, and Link and Phelan's (2001) Theory of Stigma. Thus far, the study has led to the creation of an awareness magazine "INKclusivity" which aims at promoting inclusivity within work environments.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout time and space, tattoos have served a variety of established cultural roles including tribal ceremonies or expressions of contemporary individuality (Ramirez et al., 2023). In the Philippines, indigenous tattoo artistry is respected professionally, but modern forms of body art face stigma (Duropan et al., 2024). There remains bias against individuals with visible tattoos in employment opportunities and career progression despite constitutional protections for free expression (The LawPhil Project, n.d.) and anti-discrimination legislation (AMSLaw, n.d.).

This investigation applies Salvini's (2010) Symbolic Interaction Theory to explain how social meaning is attributed to tattoos in interpersonal relations; Green's (2010) Self-Expression Theory on tattooing as a reflection of one's identity and agency; as well as Link and Phelan's (2001) Theory of Stigma on the enduring societal and professional biases regarding body art.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the motivations, stigma, and cultural relevance of tattoos in professional settings. It seeks to answer:

1. What are the motivations behind getting tattoos, and how are they symbolically interpreted?
2. How do professionals with tattoos navigate workplace stigma and related policies?
3. How are tattoos perceived across various professional sectors?
4. What material can be developed to promote understanding and inclusivity regarding tattoos in the workplace?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences of tattooed individuals in professional settings.

Respondents and Sampling: Twenty-eight participants were purposively, and snowball sampled:

- 10 tattooed professionals (ages 26–42)
- 8 HR officers (ages 24–31)

Data Collection: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and Google Forms surveys with open-ended questions.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was employed to categorize recurring themes in line with the study's objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

RESULTS

1. **Motivations and Symbolism:** Respondents expressed tattoos as outlets for emotional healing, cultural pride, artistic expression, and personal milestones. These align with Green's Self-Expression Theory and Salvini's symbolic interpretations (Frankel et al., 2023).
2. **Workplace Stigma:** Despite growing acceptance, visible tattoos often invite bias. Many professionals employ strategies such as concealment. This reflects Link and Phelan's view of stigmatized identity management (White, 2020).
3. **Sector-Based Perceptions:** Creative sectors are more accepting of tattoos than conservative industries. Students showed more openness, indicating a generational shift (Junio et al., 2024).
4. **Output:** An awareness magazine titled "INKclusivity" was developed to advocate for inclusive workplace policies and broader cultural understanding. (see attached)

DISCUSSION

As described in the study, participants' motivations pointed to a desire for affirming their identity which aligns with Green's assertion that self-expression lies at the heart of human flourishing. Tattoos serve as visual narratives embodying individual experiences and social interactions, a point made by Salvini's Symbolic Interactionism (Duropan et al., 2024).

However, the enduring stigma captures Link and Phelan's argument where marked individuals are covered within the frames of social structure and power relations (Belkin, 2021). The acceptance and rejection from various domains simultaneously demonstrates the existent professional risks associated with having tattoos.

The INKclusivity project aims to raise awareness and stimulate conversations which aligns with advocacy goals for fostering a more inclusive culture as highlighted by this research.

CONCLUSION

Tattoos stand as intricate signifiers of identity and sociocultural context, yet they remain a matter of professional dispute. A self-expression, interaction, and stigma framework reveals socially constructed meanings accompany personal interpretations about tattoos.

Traditional office cultures continue to perpetuate stigma; however, younger generations and creative industries offer glimmers of optimism. Raising awareness through campaigns such as "INKclusivity" seeks to challenge workplace policies that disregard the diversity lovingly etched into skins as a celebration of humanity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the following recommendations were created:

- Integrate educational programs about the cultural and personal significance of tattoos.
- Enforce anti-discrimination workplace policies inclusive of body art.
- Encourage dialogue between management and staff on appearance policies.
- Distribute "INKclusivity" in academic and professional institutions to enhance tattoo awareness.

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OUTPUT

MAY 30, 2025

VOL 1

INKed INKCLUSIVITY

ART. IDENTITY. NOT A HINDRANCE.



Dear Readers,

Welcome to INKed, a magazine born from curiosity, passion, and a bold challenge to the outdated stereotypes surrounding tattoos in the professional world.

As college researchers, we wanted to explore how tattoos—often misunderstood—interact with professionalism, identity, and self-expression. Through this magazine, we hope to bridge the gap between artistic expression and corporate perception, highlighting real stories, cultural history, and our own research findings.

Whether you're inked or ink-curious, may these pages inspire appreciation and break down stigma.

— The Editorial Team

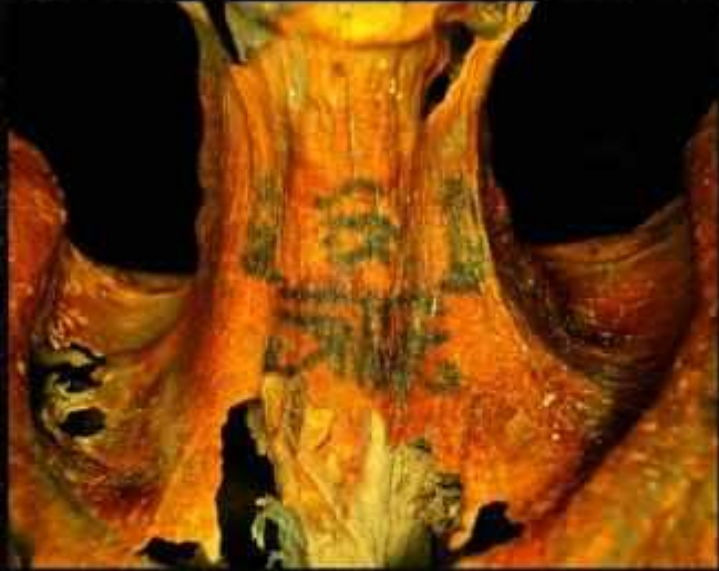
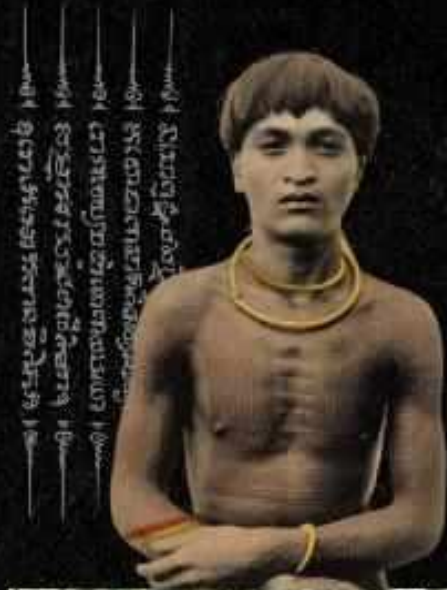
TATTOOS ARE EVERYWHERE—FROM HOLLYWOOD RED CARPETS TO HOSPITAL HALLWAYS AND COURTROOM BENCHES. YET, A LINGERING QUESTION REMAINS: CAN YOU BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY WITH VISIBLE INK?

OUR RESEARCH TITLED “BEYOND SKIN DEEP: EXPLORING THE STIGMA, MOTIVATIONS, AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TATTOOS IN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD” AIMS TO SHED LIGHT ON HOW TATTOOS ARE PERCEIVED IN DIFFERENT PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS.



THIS MAGAZINE COMBINES OUR **FINDINGS** WITH **REAL VOICES, CULTURAL INSIGHTS**, AND A BIT OF **CREATIVE EXPRESSION**—ALL IN ONE SPACE.

TATTOOS HAVE EXISTED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, FOUND ON ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MUMMIES, POLYNESIAN WARRIORS, AND JAPANESE MONKS. FOR MANY, TATTOOS MARK TRANSITIONS, PROTECT THE WEARER, OR SIGNIFY SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS.



IN FILIPINO CULTURE, TRADITIONAL TATTOOS (E.G., BATOK) SYMBOLIZED BRAVERY AND STATUS. BUT AS COLONIZATION AND MODERNIZATION SWEEP THROUGH, BODY INK WAS LABELED "REBELLIOUS" OR "UNPROFESSIONAL."



TODAY, MANY ARE RECLAIMING TATTOOS AS ART, IDENTITY, AND EXPRESSION—NOT AS REBELLION, BUT AS REPRESENTATION.

THINK TATTOOS AND PROFESSIONALISM DON'T MIX? THINK AGAIN. ACROSS INDUSTRIES—FROM COURTROOMS AND CLASSROOMS TO HOSPITALS AND BOARDROOMS—THERE ARE BOLD, BRILLIANT INDIVIDUALS PROVING THAT INK IS NOT A BARRIER TO SUCCESS, BUT A BADGE OF AUTHENTICITY.



IN THIS SECTION, WE SPOTLIGHT REAL-LIFE PROFESSIONALS WHO PROUDLY WEAR THEIR TATTOOS WHILE THRIVING IN THEIR CAREERS. EACH PIECE OF INK TELLS A STORY: OF COURAGE, CULTURE, CREATIVITY, OR PERSONAL GROWTH. WHETHER IT'S A SURGEON WITH A SLEEVE, A LAWYER WITH A BACK PIECE, OR A TEACHER WITH A SUBTLE SCRIPT TATTOO, THESE TRAILBLAZERS REMIND US THAT WHAT'S ON YOUR SKIN DOESN'T DEFINE YOUR SKILLS—IT ENHANCES YOUR STORY.

GET INSPIRED. GET INKSPIRED. LET'S MEET THE PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE *BREAKING THE MOLD, NOT THE RULES.*



APO WHANG OD

MAMBABATOK, FILIPINO TATTOO LEGEND

USING ONLY A THORN, BAMBOO STICK, AND NATURAL INK, SHE TATTOOS MEANINGFUL SYMBOLS—EACH REPRESENTING BRAVERY, IDENTITY, AND HERITAGE—ON PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE. ONCE EXCLUSIVE TO WARRIORS AND TRIBE MEMBERS, THESE DESIGNS HAVE NOW REACHED GLOBAL ATTENTION, WITH ARTISTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND EVEN CELEBRITIES MAKING THE PILGRIMAGE TO RECEIVE HER SACRED INK.

AT OVER 100 YEARS OLD, APO WHANG-OD IS MORE THAN A TATTOO ARTIST—SHE'S A CULTURAL ICON AND A NATIONAL TREASURE. HAILING FROM BUSCALAN, KALINGA, SHE IS THE LAST TRADITIONAL MAMBABATOK (HAND-TAP TATTOOIST) OF HER GENERATION, PRESERVING AN ANCIENT ART FORM PASSED DOWN THROUGH BLOODLINES AND RITUALS.

MORE THAN HER AGE OR FAME, WHAT MAKES WHANG-OD EXTRAORDINARY IS HER ROLE IN BRIDGING THE PAST AND PRESENT. SHE PROVES THAT TATTOOS ARE NOT JUST TRENDS—THEY'RE TRADITION, CARRYING STORIES FAR DEEPER THAN THE SKIN. IN A WORLD WHERE VISIBLE INK IS STILL JUDGED, APO WHANG-OD STANDS AS A PROUD REMINDER: TATTOOS ARE NOT REBELLION. THEY ARE ROOTS.

LOURD DE VEYRA

WRITER, CULTURAL CRITIC, MUSICIAN, TV HOST

LOURD DE VEYRA IS A MAN OF MANY THINGS—WRITER, MUSICIAN, TV HOST, CULTURAL CRITIC, AND UNAPOLOGETICALLY TATTOOED. KNOWN FOR HIS SHARP WIT AND FEARLESS COMMENTARY, LOURD USES BOTH LANGUAGE AND BODY ART TO EXPRESS TRUTH, REBELLION, AND IDENTITY.

WITH HIS SIGNATURE VISIBLE TATTOOS, HE CHALLENGES THE MOLD OF THE “CLEAN-CUT PROFESSIONAL,” PROVING THAT INTELLIGENCE AND CREDIBILITY ARE NOT DEFINED BY HOW ONE LOOKS—BUT BY HOW ONE THINKS. HIS TATTOOS, LIKE HIS POETRY AND PROSE, ARE LAYERED WITH MEANING: A PERSONAL MANIFESTO INKED INTO FLESH.

WHETHER HE'S DELIVERING BITING SATIRE ON TV, PERFORMING WITH HIS BAND RADIOACTIVE SAGO PROJECT, OR WRITING THOUGHT-PROVOKING ESSAYS, LOURD STANDS AS A LIVING PROOF THAT INK BELONGS IN INTELLECTUAL SPACES TOO. IN A SOCIETY WHERE APPEARANCE STILL DICTATES RESPECT, LOURD DE VEYRA REMINDS US: THE MOST POWERFUL MESSAGES AREN'T JUST SPOKEN—THEY'RE WORN.



CARLOS CELDRAN

CULTURAL ACTIVIST, PERFORMANCE ARTIST

HIS TATTOOS WEREN'T JUST AESTHETIC—THEY WERE STATEMENTS, WOVEN INTO HIS IDENTITY AS A FEARLESS DEFENDER OF FREEDOM, CULTURE, AND SECULARISM. JUST LIKE HIS PERFORMANCES, HIS INK TOLD STORIES: STORIES OF FILIPINO HERITAGE, PERSONAL BATTLES, AND THE EVER-EVOLVING FIGHT FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION.

THE LATE CARLOS CELDRAN WAS MORE THAN JUST A PERFORMANCE ARTIST AND CULTURAL ACTIVIST—HE WAS A WALKING REVOLUTION. KNOWN FOR HIS ICONIC "DAMASO" PROTEST AND IMMERSIVE "WALK THIS WAY" TOURS OF INTRAMUROS, CELDRAN USED HISTORY, HUMOR, AND BODY ART TO CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO AND BRING THE PAST TO LIFE.

IN A WORLD THAT OFTEN LABELS THE TATTOOED AS REBELLIOUS OR UNPROFESSIONAL, CARLOS CELDRAN STOOD PROUDLY—PROVING THAT TRUE PROFESSIONALISM LIES NOT IN CONFORMITY, BUT IN CONVICTION. WITH EVERY TATTOO AND EVERY MONOLOGUE, HE REMINDED US THAT ART, EVEN ON THE SKIN, CAN BE REVOLUTIONARY.

DR. SARAH GRAY

SPECIALIST RECONSTRUCTIVE AND COSMETIC SURGEON

IN A COAT AND FULL TATTOO SLEEVES, DR. SARAH GRAY IS REDEFINING WHAT A SURGEON LOOKS LIKE. A HIGHLY RESPECTED RECONSTRUCTIVE AND COSMETIC SURGEON FROM AUSTRALIA, SHE PROVES THAT PROFESSIONALISM IS MEASURED BY EXPERTISE—NOT APPEARANCE.

WITH BOLD INK WRAPPED AROUND HER ARMS, DR. GRAY PERFORMS COMPLEX SURGERIES AND HELPS PATIENTS FEEL WHOLE AGAIN—WHILE PROUDLY EXPRESSING HER IDENTITY THROUGH BODY ART. FOR HER, TATTOOS ARE NOT A BARRIER TO RESPECT, BUT A BRIDGE TO EMPATHY. "MY TATTOOS OFTEN START CONVERSATIONS," SHE SHARES. "THEY MAKE ME MORE APPROACHABLE—ESPECIALLY TO YOUNGER PATIENTS."

IN A FIELD WHERE APPEARANCES ARE OFTEN JUDGED HARSHLY, DR. GRAY IS LIVING PROOF THAT TATTOOS AND TALENT CAN—AND DO—COEXIST. HER PRESENCE IN THE OPERATING ROOM IS NOT JUST POWERFUL—IT'S REVOLUTIONARY.

"TATTOOED? YOU WON'T GET HIRED."

DESPITE PROGRESS, THIS MYTH STILL ECHOES IN MANY WORKPLACES. IN OUR INTERVIEWS, HR PROFESSIONALS EXPRESSED CAUTION TOWARD VISIBLE TATTOOS, FEARING THEY MIGHT "SEND THE WRONG MESSAGE." COLLEGE STUDENTS VOICED ANXIETY OVER HOW FUTURE EMPLOYERS WOULD SEE THEIR INK.



BUT TATTOOED PROFESSIONALS ARGUE OTHERWISE:

"WHAT MATTERS IS MY PERFORMANCE, NOT MY SKIN."

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES NOW FOCUS MORE ON SKILLS, ETHICS, AND RESULTS—NOT APPEARANCES. IT'S TIME TO LET GO OF OUTDATED BIASES AND **FOCUS ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS.**

INKED EVIDENCE

PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVES ON BODY INKS AND ACCEPTANCE
LOCAL INITIATIVES – DISCUSSIONS – STORIES



THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF MANILA ORGANIZED AN EVENT CALLED **"TINTANG MANILEÑO"** TO CELEBRATE TATTOO CULTURE AND BREAK THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH BODY ART. THE EVENT FEATURED TATTOO ARTISTS AND ENTHUSIASTS, PROMOTING THE IDEA THAT TATTOOS ARE A FORM OF ART AND SELF-EXPRESSION.

LIGA NG MGA BARANGAY PRESIDENT AND COUNCIL LEI LACUNA SAID "IN MOST OF THE REGIONS IN THE COUNTRY, TATTOO IS BEING STEREOTYPED AS PERSONS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY (PDLs) OR PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS (PWUDs) AND ASSOCIATED WITH DISCRIMINATION. MANILA AS A CITY, IS RICH IN DIFFERENT CULTURE CULTIVATED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, AND THIS IS CELEBRATED AS A CULTURE AND IN ART FORM."

"THE GOAL OF TINTANG MANILEÑO IS TO SHARE THEIR OWN STORIES AS A TATTOO ARTIST AND HOW THEY LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE THEY MEET AND HEAR STORIES FROM" COUNCILOR LEI ADDED.

THE ACTIVITY WAS HELD DURING THE CONDUCT OF THE "OBRANG MANILEÑO, ANG OBRA NG BAYAN," WHERE ATTENDEES WERE ENCOURAGED TO PRACTICE THEIR CREATIVITY THROUGH A WIDE RANGE OF MEDIUM.

INKED EVIDENCE

PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVES ON BODY INKS AND ACCEPTANCE
LOCAL INITIATIVES – DISCUSSIONS – STORIES



IN EARLY 2024, MANILA REP. JOEL CHUA AND OTHER LEGISLATORS PUBLICLY CALLED ON THE PHILIPPINE NATIONAL POLICE TO DROP ITS “UNCONSTITUTIONAL” MEMORANDA FORCING OFFICERS TO REMOVE VISIBLE TATTOOS. THEY ARGUED THAT INK DOES NOT REFLECT AN OFFICER’S MORAL CONDUCT OR CAPABILITY, AND NOTED THAT THE BAN WASN’T GROUNDED IN ANY EXISTING CODE OF CONDUCT OR POLICE LAW.

ACCORDING TO MANILA REP. JOEL CHUA, PNP MEMORANDUM CIRCULAR 2024-023, WHICH MANDATES POLICE PERSONNEL TO DISCLOSE AND REMOVE VISIBLE TATTOOS, LACKS JUSTIFICATION.

ACCORDING TO HIM, THERE WAS NO PROVISION IN REPUBLIC ACT 6975 OR THE LAW CREATING THE PNP, AND IN REPUBLIC ACT NO. 6713 OR THE CODE OF CONDUCT AND ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND EMPLOYEES REFERRING TO TATTOOS.

THIS BOLD MOVE BY REP. JOEL CHUA AND HIS COLLEAGUES MARKS A TURNING POINT: IT REFRAMES TATTOOS NOT AS A MARK OF IMPROPRIETY BUT AS PROTECTED SELF-EXPRESSION. BY CALLING THE PNP’S MEMORANDUM CIRCULAR “UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND BASELESS,” LAWMAKERS UNDERSCORED THAT INK ON SKIN CARRIES NO BEARING ON ONE’S MORAL CONDUCT OR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE.

AS ADVOCATES FOR INCLUSIVITY, WE SEE IN THIS DEBATE A POWERFUL REMINDER: WHEN INSTITUTIONS BEGIN TO JUDGE CHARACTER BY PERFORMANCE RATHER THAN APPEARANCE, THEY OPEN THE DOOR TO A RICHER, MORE DIVERSE WORKFORCE—ONE WHERE PERSONAL STORIES, TOLD IN INK, ARE VALUED RATHER THAN ERASED.

TINTA AT TIWALA: THOUGHTS FROM THE TATTOOED AND THE OBSERVANT

"TATTOOS SHOULD NOT BE A BARRIER IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS. IT'S A PERSONAL CHOICE AND REFLECTS INDIVIDUALITY."

COLLEGE STUDENT WHEN ASKED ABOUT THEIR THOUGHTS ON TATTOOS IN TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL WORLD

AN EDUCATOR'S THOUGHTS ON THE PROFESSIONAL IMAGE OF TATTOOED INDIVIDUALS

"AS OF THE MOMENT I THINK THE INDUSTRY THAT I AM INTO (EDUCATION) IS GETTING INTO THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIVERSITY, HENCE PROVIDING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN TERMS OF SEX, GENDER, PREFERENCES JUST LIKE TATTOOS."

"IN THE PAST, TATTOOS WERE ASSOCIATED WITH NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES, BUT I'VE SEEN AN IMPROVEMENT IN HOW THEY'RE VIEWED. HOWEVER, SOME BIASES STILL EXIST."

A HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL'S VIEW TOWARDS THE STIGMA AND BIAS

INK, NOT INCAPABLE

WE BELIEVE THAT TATTOOS ARE NOT SIGNS
OF REBELLION, BUT REFLECTIONS OF
IDENTITY.

WE BELIEVE THAT INK ON SKIN DOES NOT
EQUATE TO INCOMPETENCE.

WE BELIEVE THAT HIRING DECISIONS SHOULD
BE BASED ON CAPABILITY, NOT
CONFORMITY.

WE STAND WITH PROFESSIONALS WHO
EXPRESS THEMSELVES FEARLESSLY.

IT'S TIME TO CHALLENGE OUTDATED NORMS
AND EMBRACE THE DIVERSE STORIES PEOPLE
WEAR.



INK IS NOT A CRIME.
INK IS NOT A THREAT.
INK IS NOT INCAPABLE.