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Indelible
A Brandtrust Inquiry

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What is it about tattoos?

People without tattoos typically admit they just don't get it. People who have them usually wonder what all the fuss is about. We knew there must be more to tattoos than meets the eye, so we decided to investigate.



Tattoos.

Tattoos have an impact unlike any other personal adornment because they exist in a unique position between the self and others.

They are an outer fiction the wearer invents about himself in order to tell an inner truth. This duality doubles their symbolic power.

Tattoos show your true colors.



Why get tattooed?

Every day, more and more people get tattoos. For those who have none, there seems to be no rational reason driving this decision. Tattoos are painful, expensive and time-consuming to acquire. They change the way the world at large perceives who you are, and seldom for the better. Their permanence seems a burden in a society that prizes personal reinvention. And mothers rarely approve.

With so many arguments against tattoos, why is their popularity growing? We found there are emotional drivers that matter far more deeply than mere rational reasons. Tattoos have many layers of meaning, and are interpreted differently by various audiences, which forms an inherent part of their appeal and power.

For people who have tattoos, there appears on the surface to be a myriad of different triggering events and emotions that inspired them to take the plunge.

Tattoos, like very few things in life, produce such strong feelings of both emotional connection and emotional isolation. So, what purpose does a tattoo serve?

More than skin deep.

Tattoos are undeniably laden with layers of meaning, but what are people with tattoos using them to say?

On the surface, tattoos are simply an expression of an individual's identity. But tattoos have unique symbolic power because of three basic attributes: they're permanent, they require submission to pain to acquire them, and they communicate ideas in symbolic form, leaving them open to interpretation.

The skin is how the body is seen, but it also hides the body. It is a stage upon which shows to the outside world are performed, but it is a stage with a scrim, upon which messages from inside and outside alike can be displayed. Those messages, though they are projected upon the skin, seem to transform the worlds inside and outside the body alike.

The key to understanding the emotional reasons people are drawn to this symbolic power begins with the insight that a tattoo exists both outside of the body and inside the skin. Through its unique placement within, yet outside of the self, a tattoo acquires two layers of meaning.

Tattoos have a dual nature through which they communicate more than one message in more than one direction at once.

Standing out, not sticking out.

People who get tattoos already feel that they stick out, even before they add color to their appearance. They feel rejected by the very society that they are expected to be a part of, and believe they must choose between trying to change who they are and accepting that they do not fit in.

To the larger world, a tattoo makes a declaration that one's social isolation has been a matter of choice; that one could have changed to measure up to the expectations of society, but did not.

Tattoos are a way for people to broadcast a statement that they don't fit in, and don't want to fit in. Tattoos communicate a sense of pride in one's distinction from the norm. A person with tattoos no longer needs to suffer from anxiety about whether they can meet the expectations of mainstream society, because with tattoos they have moved beyond that set of expectations.

Tattoos are clear statements of willing nonconformity, and refute any suspicion that failure to fit in is unintended.

A tattoo thus transforms someone who sticks out into someone who stands out.

The first mark is the deepest.

Most people with multiple tattoos acquired their first one during adolescence, and the image chosen was usually not of much significance.

The forbidden nature of tattoos makes them especially attractive to teenagers, who seek to separate from their families and forge their new, mature identities. On the surface level, a tattoo's presence communicates to the world at large that its wearer is tough, not to be messed with, and presumably, an adult. For a teenager, that is enough.

A tattoo provides a visual mark of maturity, and the very process of getting the tattoo provides an adult experience. Acquiring a first tattoo is a self-referential event, memorializing itself and creating meaning by its mere existence. So, for their first tattoos, it doesn't matter that most people choose generic "flash" designs from the walls of tattoo parlors. For subsequent tattoos, however, the choice of unique images with personal significance becomes increasingly important.

The act of getting a tattoo creates a concrete boundary between childhood and adulthood where one would otherwise not exist. The first tattoo takes on significance of the same sort as coming-of-age rituals in traditional cultures.



Open to misinterpretation.

Tattoos are pure contradiction. At first glance, they are all show and bluster, worn only by criminals and deviants in an attempt to convey surface messages of intimidation and toughness in order to shut out a society that is quick to criticize. Yet, within the intimate circle of the initiated, tattoos are just the opposite.

For those dedicated to the art of tattooing, the skin becomes a stage upon which a living, magical expression communicates a deeply personal message. It is on the deeper level of a tattoo's specific imagery, and that image's very personal significance, that a tattoo speaks to a smaller circle about who its wearer truly is.

There is no single code for tattoos. Instead, tattoos transmit codes within codes, the depth of which can only be understood by those who possess the necessary insight and experience with which to decode. To outsiders, tattoos are misinterpreted as a loud medium of communication to the exterior world. To those that know better, the marks represent a silent reminder of where the person with the tattoos has been hurt on the inside and remains the most vulnerable.

The deepest meaning remains for the tattoo owner to know and to share only with those who prove themselves worthy.

Social chameleons.

The job interview is the ultimate test of a tattooed person's individuality, because professional environments usually require some measure of compliance and conformity. Tattoos are expressions of individuality and rebellion, so tattooed people usually decide to conceal their true identities by hiding their tattoos for job interviews.

It might be said that by covering their tattoos with clothes, tattoo zealots are temporarily undoing all the work of self definition they have accomplished with each piece of body art. But if the skin is thought of as a selectively permeable membrane that separates the self from others, then clothing can be seen as merely the final layer of skin, with which a tattoo's meaning may be adjusted yet again. Indeed, in the decision to place their tattoos in locations on their bodies where clothing can cover them, the option to conceal a tattoo is made an essential part of its set of potential meanings.

People who have tattoos do not always want their truest identity to be available for examination by all viewers. The face, because it is always on display, is the last frontier for body art, where only the most daring will place a tattoo.

Tattooed people are social chameleons, able to change the impression they broadcast at will by donning clothes that mask this essential element of their identity.

The dues of pain.

Pain is a sacrifice that is essential to the ritual of tattooing. Pain is the currency of transformation, and the more pain that people offer under the tattoo artist's guidance, the more powerful their transformation will be.

Most people regard pain as something to be avoided, but people with multiple tattoos embrace the pain that is an inherent part of this experience. People who get tattoos do not seek pain for its own sake, however. Rather, the importance of the pain they have endured is that they have chosen to experience it. Instead of being subject to its power, they learn to master pain. The ritual of tattooing transforms people with tattoos from victims of pain into its conquerors.

When discussing their body art, tattoo zealots measure their adornments not in the amount of money they paid, but in the length of time they were able to withstand the pain of the artist's needle. Enduring the tattoo's accompanying pain is like paying dues, and provides the psychological force that allows the transformation of the self. A tattoo obtained without pain, even if it could be permanent, would be meaningless.

"If there were not any pain to getting a tattoo, anybody could do it and walk into a place and get a picture slapped on them. I wouldn't have any if it were like that."



Drawn into the tribe.

Even as tattooed people stand apart from society in general, they create an alternative society of their own. At one level, there is a contradiction between the use of tattoos as a way to mark one's independence from the larger culture while using them to demonstrate conformity within the smaller community of tattooed people. Belonging to this group creates an emotionally safe, accepting haven for those who have chosen to set themselves apart.

The magical transformation created by a tattoo is permanent, so people seek the guidance and protection of tattoo artists who have traveled deep into the symbolic territory of tattoos and are familiar with its landmarks. Within this society, the tattoo artist is not simply the means by which tattoos are acquired. He or she is the community's spiritual leader, transmitting tattoo rules and lore, and testing the supplicant to make sure they are worthy of the image to be bestowed.

Tattoo artists are the ultimate arbiters of who will join this tribe. They guide people to an understanding of the meaning of the tattoos they have chosen, leading their clients through conversations about the significance of the image and the reasons that the tattoo has been selected, creating a memorable, ritualized occasion that is evoked whenever the tattoo is viewed.



Emotional exorcism.

For many, the process of getting a tattoo is like undergoing an emotional exorcism. To the uninitiated, tattoos create the impression that the people who have them are tough, but many people feel compelled to acquire tattoos for the exact opposite reason: because they feel vulnerable and have already been marked on the inside by careless people or cruel events. They see the process of acquiring a tattoo as a necessary ritual for their emotional salvation.

A tattooed image represents something that already exists within the person who bears it. A tattoo is therefore not so much created from ink as it is extracted from the mind of the person being tattooed. The creation of a tattoo is like a ritual of exorcism in which an idea, feeling, or memory is removed from inside the tattooed person, where it is able to harm their psyche.

By means of a tattoo, a destructive thought is exorcised and trapped on a small area of skin, neither completely inside nor outside of the self, where its damage can be contained. As a result, the rest of the tattooed person is protected from that pain, inoculated against similar vulnerability in the future.

Living road maps.

By making permanent marks on the self, tattoos paradoxically become eternal attributes that also reveal the evolution of the self over time. Tattoos persist even as the people who have them change. Much as navigators use the predictable positions of the stars to mark the course of their unchanging travels, tattooed people regard their unchanging tattoos as landmarks on their own journeys of growth, loss, and recovery. Without the attribute of permanence, the power of a tattoo withers.

As much as tattoos derive meaning from their permanence, they are also used to commemorate significant change in the lives of the people who wear them.

Tattoos help people feel that their progress is permanent, so that they cannot slide back into past troubles. People with tattoos often use them to mark negative events or serious mistakes in their lives, or recovery from those setbacks. By memorializing these problems with tattoos, they are put in the past, while retaining a record of the path that has been traveled as guidance for preventing future transgressions.

Tattoos illustrate a map of the wearer's life. The proper reading of that map shows who the person was when each tattoo was created, and how that person has changed since.

Getting under the skin.

So, why do people get tattoos?

Tattoos are not simply surface adornments, but unique, encoded messages with complex layers of meaning.

Because they live both within and outside of the body, they have the potential to simultaneously armor the wearer against the outside world and reveal the unvarnished truth of his or her inner reality.

Underlying their individual differences, people with tattoos share a contradictory desire to tell the world how tough they are, while at the same time reminding themselves of that which makes them most vulnerable.

The meaning of a tattoo can change over time, but its very deepest significance remains for its wearer to know and share only with those who prove themselves sincerely interested in understanding what it represents.

Wearing tattoos makes internal thoughts visible and as a result, a tattoo is the opposite of a mask. Although tattoos visually cover the skin, they reveal their owners. Tattoos show their wearers' true colors.

“You don’t get tattooed
for other people. You get
tattooed for something
within yourself. The only
way to get this thing that
lives inside of you out is
to get tattooed.”

- tattoo zealout



About Brandtrust

Brandtrust specializes in helping our clients understand the emotional factors that drive consumer decisions, create trust in the marketplace and engage employees in the workplace.

Understanding the real nature of consumer emotions is fundamental to success.

The Emotional Inquiry® Study

Brandtrust Emotional Inquiry® Study methods involve one-on-one interviews in which the respondents are guided through relaxation and visualization exercises and respond to a series of probes about experiences in their past and how they feel as they recall the times, places and people involved. These techniques are not new to psychological analysis, but Brandtrust is among the first to use them extensively in a commercial way.