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Ink as Armor: An Examination into the Relationship Between Tattooing and the Ability to Cope with Negative Life Events

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INK AS ARMOR: AN EXAMINATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TATTOOING AND THE ABILITY TO COPE WITH NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS

A Thesis Submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

by

Alexander Rajiv Arora

May 2018
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface + Acknowledgements ................................................................. iv  

I. Introduction ...................................................................................... 1  

II. Chapter One: The History and Evolution of Tattooing .................. 12  

III. Chapter Two: Tattooing Today: Cultural Differences and New  
    Contexts ......................................................................................... 28  

IV. Chapter Three: Examining Tattooing Within Regis University: A  
    Qualitative Study ........................................................................... 45  

V. Chapter Four: Moving Forward ....................................................... 58  

Works Cited ......................................................................................... 68  

Appendices ............................................................................................ 85  

Tables/Figures ....................................................................................... see list
List of Figures

Figure 1. Black chain tattoos on author’s wrists. .................................................3
Figure 2. Steampunk heart on author’s right shoulder. ............................................4
Figure 3. Biomechanical tattoo on author’s chest. .................................................5
Figure 4. Darth Vader portrait in trash polka style on author’s left shoulder blade. ......5
Figure 5. Boba Fett tattoo on author’s left shoulder. .............................................6
Figure 6. Comic strip from "The Realist" by Asaf Hanuka. ......................................6
Figure 7. A traditional Japanese bodysuit, circa 1881. ...........................................9
Figure 8. A tattoo parlor in Denmark, circa 1942. ...............................................12
Figure 9. A closer look at therapeutic tattoos found on The Iceman. .........................13
Figure 10. Drawing of ancient tattoos found on the Amunet mummy. ......................14
Figure 11. "Prince Giolo," a man from the Philippines brought to London to be exhibited. Circa 1691. ..............................................................16
Figure 12. Traditional Japanese woodblock print of Tanmeijiro Genshogo, a bandit. Circa 1823. ..............................................................18
Figure 13. Traditional Japanese woodblock print of Zhang Shun, a popular folk hero. Circa 1827-30. ..............................................................19
Figure 14. A European man being tattooed in Nagasaki, Japan. Circa 1882. ............20
Figure 15. Danish ruler King Frederick IX showing off his various tattoos. Circa 1951. 21
Figure 16. Original patent form for the electric tattoo machine, invented by Samuel F. O'Reilly. Circa 1891. ..............................................................23
Figure 17. Painless Jack Tryon, a man who worked as an attraction and who was considered "The World's Most Handsomely Tattooed Man." ......................24
Figure 18. Charlie Wagner, one of the most influential tattoo artists of the 1900s, at work with a client. ..............................................................25
Figure 19. A client recovering from a session with the Brutal Black Tattoo Project. .......28
Figure 20. One of the "Dazzling Dozen" women featured in Inked Magazine showing off her post-mastectomy tattoos. .............................................28
Figure 21. An example of a tattoo indicating an individual’s blood type. .................29
Figure 22. Appearance of eyebrows during several different phases of the tattooing process. .................................................................31

Figure 23. Before and after photos from a micro-pigmentation tattoo session on burned skin. ................................................................32

Figure 24. Before and after photos from a micro-pigmentation tattoo session on burned skin. ................................................................32

Figure 25. Members of the "Dazzling Dozen" women featured in Inked Magazine showing off their post-mastectomy tattoos. .........................................................33

Figure 26. Members of the "Dazzling Dozen" women featured in Inked Magazine showing off their post-mastectomy tattoos. .........................................................33

Figure 27. Before and after a nipple-areola reconstruction tattoo done by Vinnie Myers.................................................................35

Figure 28. Vinnie Myers working with a client. ..............................................35

Figure 29. A client resting during a session with the Brutal Black Tattoo Project. .......36

Figure 30. A client under the needle during a session with the Brutal Black Tattoo Project. .........................................................................................37

Figure 31. Drawings of various Russian criminal tattoos. .................................39

Figure 32. A prison inmate displaying a variety of common tattoos associated with criminality. ......................................................................................40

Figure 33. Numbers on the forearm, a reminder of the Holocaust, across generations. 41

Figure 34. One of many semicolon tattoos, a symbol of solidarity for those struggling with personal issues related to mental health. .................................................43
List of Tables

Table 1. Coding procedures used in interview analyses. ..........................53
Table 2. Sources of origin and art styles for individual tattoos of interviewees. ........56
Table 3. Information on the role tattoos played in coping of interviewees. ............57
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Introduction

I didn’t really care about tattoos growing up. My parents never talked about them, positively or negatively. My friends didn’t talk about them; I’m not even sure what the first tattoo I ever saw was. I have no memory of when I first learned of tattooing, no impression of how I thought about them until high school. For all intents and purposes, tattoos left no mark on my life growing up.

Somehow, I ended up with six of them (and counting).

I remember talking my parents into letting me get a tattoo when I was 16. I had a design picked out (found it on Google using the most rudimentary of search terms). I set that picture as my background on my phone, and I looked at it every day countless times to make sure that was what I wanted. My parents thought about it for a while, not giving a solid answer for a few months. My mom was more on board than my dad, but I really needed the green light from him before I could commit to doing it.

We went to India over Christmas break for a family wedding in December 2012. My dad told me at one of the many wedding events that he was ok with it and he could tell I had thought about it and I wasn’t changing my mind. I had the design put on the top of my hand in henna that same night, just to see it on me and imagine what it would be like to have it done permanently. I was exhilarated, and my dad and I went to a tattoo parlor near our house just a few weeks after we came back from India. We walked in and I asked to make an appointment, but they stopped me before I got too far ahead of myself: I was told that no reputable tattoo parlor would tattoo anyone under 18, regardless of parental approval. So there went that dream, at least for a while.
By the time I turned 18, I still wanted a tattoo, but the design didn’t stick in the same way that it had before. I knew I would get a small tattoo, at some point; I just didn’t feel clear on what that might be anymore. Oddly enough, the design for my first tattoo didn’t even occur to me until I was sitting at the bottom of the Grand Canyon following a tourist boat ride with some extended family. I’m not entirely sure if there’s some age-old adage about not making decisions in 120-degree heat after a long day, but I’m fairly pleased with the decision I made down there.

First, a little context. Earlier that summer, my mom was telling my sister and I about some of the work she was doing on her PhD, primarily focused on the role of spirituality for women with autoimmune diseases. She found a woman who does something called shamanic energy healing, a process in which this woman cleanses energy chakras and provides spiritual guidance. I have never met this woman, as she does these healing sessions from a distance. She “journeys” and simply records her observations before sending the audio file to whoever she is working on. My mom told my sister and I about this and asked if we wanted to try a session, so we agreed. I should mention here that, at the time, I was borderline atheistic and did this more out of sheer curiosity as opposed to seeking any type of spiritual guidance. It seems that in my experience in this life, we often find what we need when we stop looking for it, and this was certainly one of those times.
The recording I received from this woman, Sarah, was filled with eerily accurate information about how I was feeling and thinking at the time. It was almost unsettling to have someone I had never met simply know me so well through a practice that I didn’t fully understand. But her words were encouraging and affirming, so I didn’t fear it. Since that first session in May of 2014, I’ve been doing energy healing sessions almost every other month. They have provided me with advice, encouragement, tough love, and enlightenment, and they have provided the inspiration for almost all of my tattoos.

As I was sitting at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, I began thinking about the session and what had stuck with me. I remembered that she called me a “missing link” at multiple points throughout the session, and that phrase felt powerful and inspiring to me. I wanted to be the best version of myself for the first time in a long time, no matter how much hard work it would require, and I wanted to keep that reminder with me at all times. In what felt like a “lightbulb above my head moment,” I remembered a chain link design that I had seen a few years ago that I had always loved, though I was never sure why. Putting two and two together, the idea of marking myself with a symbol for “missing link” with this chain link seemed almost too perfect, and just like that, I was dead set on making this my first tattoo.
I shared this revelation with my mother as soon as it hit me, and she loved the idea. A few days after we got home from Arizona, I went to that same shop I went to when I was 16 and I got three little chain links on my left wrist (Figure 1). Twenty minutes, all said and done. I still needed a Jolly Rancher to balance out my blood sugar and settle my lightheadedness from adrenaline after it was done. I drove home for about 20 minutes before going to work a shift at Dairy Queen, still overflowing with adrenaline and a peculiar sense of pride. Small as it was, I had gotten a tattoo, and I felt like I was somehow part of something now, something bigger, a new community. My parents asked me every day for a week or two afterwards if I was happy with it and if I thought I would regret it, and my answer was always the same: yes, I’m thrilled with it, and no, I won’t regret it. Ever.

It was December of that same year when I got my next tattoo, a biomechanical-cyberpunk heart on my right shoulder (Figure 2), a three-and-a-half-hour process (I brought my own Jolly Ranchers this time). I started a full biomechanical skull piece on my chest (Figure 3) just four months after finishing my heart tattoo, a tattoo that took over a year to complete. Eventually, I tattooed my right wrist with the same chains as my left (Figure 1) and in the past three years, I’ve added a Boba Fett tattoo on my left deltoid (Figure 5) and a Darth Vader piece on my left shoulder blade (Figure
4). My family and I are currently in the planning process to get tattoos together for my dad’s birthday.

Four years later, it seems that I was telling the truth about not ever regretting my tattoo decision. Between all of my tattoos, I’ve spent just under 40 hours of my life getting tattooed, and I’m a little afraid to calculate how much money I’ve poured into these, but I know that I haven’t regretted a cent of it.

Sometimes people joke about tattoos being an addiction, but I have come to find that it’s not really a joke at all. I’ll never force a tattoo on myself or go out and get one for the hell of it, but tattooing very quickly became my go to method for self-expression as I began permanently imprinting pieces of myself into my skin, pieces of myself that I believed were too important to forget. My tattoos are reminders to myself, sometimes ones I don’t want, but reminders nonetheless of keys for being the best man I can possibly be. The cybernetic heart on my arm, for example, is a reminder to balance my reason and my emotion without letting
one overtake the other, an idea I had well before learning that it aligned with the critical Jesuit principle of unity of heart and mind. The black and red Darth Vader portrait on my left shoulder blade is a reminder not to forget all the beautiful characters, real and fictional, that have filled my life with joy, pain, and everything in between. My tattoos are deeply personal to me, and they are all inspired by visuals and art styles that I have loved since I was a child; none of them would exist without deep thought and a certain spiritual inspiration (spirituality is a relatively common source of inspiration for tattoos [Jeffreys, 2000]). As cliché as it sounds, sometimes there’s just a gut feeling where a tattoo feels like a necessary addition to me; thinking about myself without them feels almost cold and alien.

Naturally, my reasoning isn’t universal; there are countless reasons that individuals may give for getting a tattoo, especially in today’s world. Tattoos began as (generally) a marker of social status (Elder, 1996; Gilbert, 2000), indicating what community or social tier an individual belonged to. While they were markers on an individual body, their meaning was almost always a mark of something distinctly separate from the individual. Today, things aren’t exactly the same: individuals still use tattoos to mark group affiliation, namely in the military, prison, and gang communities (Palermo, 2004), but reasoning for tattooing is much
more focused around individuality and marking oneself as unique or different (Millner & Eichold, 2001).

My story of tattoos is one of many, each as unique as the next. The purpose of this thesis is not to psychoanalyze myself or my decision to spend this much time and money on having a needle hammer ink into my skin thousands of times per minute; my decisions and my motivations are part of a bigger picture that I hope to paint here. Human beings encounter difficult events in their own narratives frequently throughout life (often when we’re unprepared for them), and unfortunately, tragedy and struggle will always be a part of the human condition. Rather than focusing on those tragedies, it is more important to turn our attention to coping: we understand that tragedy and strife will come into our lives, so how do we ensure that these events do not stop us from self-actualizing and living our best lives? How do we best move forward?

Coping strategies come in many different forms, depending on the individual. Generally, coping strategies can be broken into two different major categories; engagement and disengagement coping. Engagement coping involves hands-on problem solving and approaching stressors or problems head on while disengagement coping is classified as distancing oneself from one’s problems and emotionally numbing oneself in relation to the problems (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Studies have shown that engagement coping strategies can lead to significantly better outcomes for an individual compared to disengagement coping strategies, namely healthier mental and physical states (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Engagement coping can take many forms, and
one of the more interesting routes available to communities is art therapy, or the creation of artwork as a means of processing difficult events.

Art therapy is a modality typically used in populations of children or individuals suffering from addiction. In both populations, the exercise of creating artwork (sometimes with interpretation, sometimes without) allows for the client to express what they’re feeling and experiencing in a nonverbal manner, avoiding the difficult process of verbalizing a potentially traumatic event while still externalizing the issue (Harms, 1973). Additionally, the physical creation of the art by an individual experiencing trauma allows for the person to express feeling in a self-guided manner, which can lead to improvements in self-esteem (Foulke & Keller, 1976). When faced with a traumatic or difficult event, it is not uncommon for our brains to employ a variety of defense mechanisms, or adaptive (and occasionally maladaptive) mental tactics that protect the individual from the debilitating effects of trauma (Grohol, 2017). In many cases, removing or destabilizing these defense mechanisms can be unnecessarily damaging and stressful for the individual who needs them, so the ideal way forward is to help an individual process this difficult event in their narrative without denying them of their defense mechanisms. For children, art therapy has shown to be a practice where they can express their emotions in a format that can work in conjunction with their natural defense
mechanisms without forcing them to use language or words that children can’t understand or process just yet (Gerteisen, 2008; Lusebrink, 2004).

Beyond children and individuals suffering from addiction, art therapy and other forms of self-expressive coping have shown promising results. An art therapy program in a group of patients undergoing palliative care led to reduced feelings of anxiety and a better overall feeling of physical health (Thomas & Kennedy, 1995). Writing about difficult events has shown comparable results, with improvements in physical health and a less stressful mental coping process (Smyth, 1998). Even when individuals aren’t coping with a specific trauma or difficult event, self-expression (as well as an environment that welcomes self-expression) can lead to improved recognition of inner strengths and a greater appreciation for the self as a whole (Bogar, Ganos, Hoormann, Bub-Standal & Beyer, 2016). With that understanding, it is clear that self-directed coping strategies can both empower and strengthen an individual without placing a heavy reliance on external resources or interventions.
Self-expression is a healthy and self-guided coping strategy, and art therapy is a practice that embodies this idea. For many people, myself included, tattooing is an ideal synthesis of artistic talent and self-expression. Isn’t it only natural that tattoos fit into this picture of self-guided coping?

Tattoos are quite popular. Research indicates that, amongst millennials, approximately four out of ten people have at least one tattoo (Keene & Handrich, 2010). Primary reasons for tattooing include asserting individuality, signifying group affiliation, and, yes, commemorating an experience or person from the past (Antoszewski, Sitek, Fijalkowska, Kasielska, & Kruk-Jeromin, 2010). A separate study of over 350 individuals found that 40% of those surveyed reported “remembrance” as the primary reason for receiving their tattoo (Dimitropoulos, Brown, Ressa, & Newman, 2016). If individuals are already using tattoos to mark important narrative events, it only makes sense to explore this further and understand what might motivate someone to seek tattooing as part of their coping process.

The thesis presented here will begin with an exploration of the history of tattooing as an artistic medium to try and identify when this trend of commemorating people or events might have surfaced. From there, we will examine tattooing in the modern world, across various cultures and contexts, to understand where this trend might be most prevalent throughout the world and why. As we narrow the scope even further, we will examine tattooing in the Regis University community, examining how and why individuals come to the decision to tattoo themselves as part of their coping journey. Finally, we will synthesize the information gleamed from previous research as well as the
research being conducted here with the Regis community to unearth new answers and new questions in the understanding of what role tattoos and self-expression can play in human coping. Self-expression as a means of coping with difficult events in the individual and collective narrative is a topic in need of further exploration and innovation, and it is time to bring tattooing into this conversation.
Chapter One: The History and Evolution of Tattooing

Figure 7. A traditional Japanese bodysuit, circa 1881.

Figure 8. A tattoo parlor in Denmark, circa 1942.
Our knowledge of tattoos begins with a 5,200-year-old mummy named The Iceman, the earliest known human being to have tattoos (Pesapane, Nazarro, Gianotti, & Coggi, 2014). Discovered in the early 1990s, The Iceman has tattoos all over his body, though they appear to be primarily for therapeutic purposes. Used as a form of acupuncture, the markings are etched around points of stress and strain on the Iceman’s body, designed to ease his pain (Figure 9) (Lineberry, 2007). The Iceman is rather unique in ancient tattooing, in that we don’t see other figures with “therapeutic” tattoos, at least not in figures that have been discovered. Tattooing in other ancient regions of the world was focused primarily on worldly objects and more concrete visuals rather than crude etchings for pain relief (Gilbert, 2001). However, while other historical tattoos seem less focused on physical pain management, they served equally valuable cultural roles.

Figure 9. A closer look at therapeutic tattoos found on The Iceman.
The known history of ancient tattoos before the discovery of The Iceman focused on 4000-35000 BC Egypt, where tattoos were primarily used as amulets or good luck charms for women facing the prospect of childbirth (Lineberry, 2007). The first known image tattooed (that is to say, the first image that we can conclude is not an obscure pattern of lines without a distinct visual focus) is of an Egyptian god known as Bes, who was believed to protect women during pregnancy (Gilbert, 2000). Some of the tattoos from this period included complicated net designs that were tattooed on the stomachs of pregnant women, meaning that the tattoo would change and grow with the stomach during pregnancy (Gilbert, 2000; Lineberry, 2007). During early excavations and discoveries of Egyptian mummies, many assumed that the tattoos on women were marks of prostitutes or other low-class standing, but we know now that women were tattooed more frequently in this protective and honorary manner. Additionally, many of the female mummies discovered were buried in a location reserved for individuals of high status and royalty (Mark, 2017). One specific mummy, Amunet (Figure 10), provides a strong example of this use of tattooing among highly regarded women, given that she was a high priestess in her time. Tattooing in ancient Egypt seems to have been a practice exclusive to women in every phase of the tattooing.
process with women in the community designing and applying the tattoos for other women (Lineberry, 2007).

Tattooing has never been a medium devoid of controversy, even from the beginning. The practice of tattooing rose independently in distinct cultures around the globe, which partially explains why there is such a great diversity in usage and meaning around the world. In Egypt, we see that women were the exclusive recipients of tattoos that intended to protect them during the physically demanding time of child bearing. However, in Greek and Roman cultures, tattoos bore virtually no positive image and were used primarily to mark slaves and military deserters (Jones, 1987). Plato himself wrote that he believed individuals who committed sacrilege should be tattooed (usually without consent) and banished. Even the emperor Theophilus forced two monks who criticized his rule to have nearly a dozen lines of offensive poetry tattooed on their faces (Gilbert, 2000). Practices like these died out as Christianity took hold in the area, but the usage of tattooing in a highly negative context on such a large scale is part of the reason why the stigma of tattooing as a deviant practice exists.

Perhaps no culture placed as much emphasis and power in the art of tattooing as Polynesian cultures. Men and women both received tattoos, though the heavier spiritual weight and meaning in tattoos was clearly reserved for males, given the coveted ceremonies associated with the act (Gilbert, 2000). Warrior tattoos generally consisted of markings from the waist to the knee, with strong black geometric shapes wrapping around the legs (Figure 11). Women received geometric work as well, though it was more floral in nature and reserved for the hands and lower body (Taylor, 1981). As colonizers
discovered more cultures and claimed more territory, they saw tattoos as markings from native religions, failing to understand (or ignoring) the significance of the tattoos to those who wore them. Eventually, the European settlers banned tattooing due to their new association with anti-European ideals (Gilbert, 2000). Even as this was happening, European sailors developed a certain appreciation for Polynesian tattoos, and after learning from the native artists, began practicing themselves and established tattoo parlors in Europe. The British Navy became filled with sailors who memorialized their time and travels abroad with Polynesian artwork, possibly indicating where this practice of using tattoos as “memorials” began.

In Samoa, colonialism and Christianity still swept through the area and left a deep mark, yet the people were allowed to continue practicing their native rituals. Tattooing had perhaps the greatest meaning of any ancient culture in Samoa, as it was a process that was more of an expectation than a choice, regardless of how the individual felt about it. Tattooing was meant to be an elongated process, with a specific order and methodology for tattooing all parts of the body between the waist and knees, including the genitals. This months-long ritual was both extremely painful and central to cultural practices. Tattooing was done to signify the transition into manhood; if a boy did not

Figure 11. "Prince Giolo," a man from the Philippines brought to London to be exhibited. Circa 1691.
undergo all parts of the ritual, they were rejected socially by their community and family. Local Christian converts in the area attempted to subdue the extensive practice, though once the islands came under German rule, the German governors allowed the practices to continue (Gilbert, 2000).

The practice of tattooing rose and fell among various island cultures, some of which we know more about than others. For the people of the Marquesas, the legacy of tattooing from head to toe has been mostly lost. With French colonization came the introduction of countless diseases that the Marquesan people were in no way equipped to handle or survive. Some scattered anecdotal accounts seem to indicate that tattooing in the Marquesas was primarily religious and rooted deeply in spirituality, though official records from the people themselves have died out over time or were never recorded (Gilbert, 2000). For the Maori people of New Zealand, a similar fate crippled most of the tribal-warrior way of life that gave their richly decorated facial tattoos so much meaning. Though their history has been recorded in much greater detail than the Marquesan people, their legacy remains mostly in Westernized interpretations found in tattoo parlors (Gilbert, 2000). Of note, the fact that these styles exist at all anymore is a testament to their creativity, artistry, and inspiration.
Perhaps one of the most popular styles of tattooing that thrives in the world today is Japanese tattooing. Much like Graeco-Roman culture, Japanese tattooing began as a form of punishment and marking of people as criminal or “other,” leading to social and familial isolation (Richie & Burma, 1996). Even with the heavy focus on tattooing as a signal of criminality, tattoos for the sake of decoration began to gain traction around the same time (eighteenth century), lessening the stigma around tattooing as a whole (Gilbert, 2000). As for the “style” of Japanese tattoo that we recognize today, it began to take shape alongside other elements of traditional Japanese culture, namely Kabuki theater and Bunraku (puppet theatre). Creativity in Japan flourished during the mid-1700s, and with it, stories and novels that required illustration. Artists began designing elaborate wood block illustrations (Figures 12 & 13) to accompany written stories, and on the side, artists would also design tattoos for extra money (Gilbert, 2000). Additionally, the figures in their illustrations often had tattoos themselves. Many of the designs and styles from classical Japanese tattooing have lasted so long due to their original iterations coming at the hands of highly trained
artists. While many people think of tattooing as an art form unto itself, and it certainly is, having source material designed by veritable masters of the trade goes a long way towards ensuring lasting quality and influence within the medium.

Japanese woodblock illustrations peaked with the publishing of a story called *Suikoden* (1827), a story with strong anti-government sentiment laced throughout, as well as incredible illustrations of elaborate landscapes with folk heroes covered in tattoos of their own. Naturally, the emotionally charged nature of the story appealed greatly to the oppressed Japanese people living under the heel of a harsh Tokugawan regime. The regime went so far as to outlaw tattooing completely because of their deep fear of personal expression leading to destabilization of the order (Richie & Burma, 1996). This approach backfired and led to the rise of the Yakuza crime syndicate’s strong tradition of full body tattooing with the conscious intention of marking the self as a criminal forever (Dubro & Kaplan, 1987). It seems the Yakuza members took this idea to heart, so much so that modern Yakuza members often tattoo full body suits with the only untouched skin being a strip of skin down the middle of the torso.
(Sperry, 1991), supposedly to leave an untouched space in which they could stab themselves as part of a ritual suicide known as seppuku. The Yakuza found inspiration in *Suikoden*, in that the story focused on a gang of outlaws overthrowing their harsh government, an ideal that resonated with the Yakuza. Between the rise of the Yakuza and the best seller *Suikoden*, tattooing among the lower castes of Japanese society continued to gain traction.

As the Tokugawa shogunate fell apart in the late 1860s, an imperial structure was reintroduced to Japan, but the emperor held onto the ideas regarding tattoos from the previous regime. Part of the motivation behind this was fueled by the recent connections formed with the Western world; the Japanese empire was concerned that the West would consider the act of tattooing savage (Gilbert, 2000). The Tokugawa shogunate kept Japan cut off from the world, so they had virtually no idea how far tattooing had already spread as a result of colonization and exploration.

The new laws prohibited tattooing for individuals living in Japan, but it said nothing about tattooing individuals from outside of Japan (Figure 14). This loophole allowed for Japanese tattooing to spread throughout the Western world, primarily in the Americas, while also providing Japanese artists with access to new art techniques related to shading and dimension.
(Gilbert, 2000). This newfound access to Japanese tattooing even brought various European rulers to Japan to receive work including Danish ruler King Frederick IX (Figure 15) (Scutt & Gotch, 1986). This expansion of tattooing to the Western world created one of the bigger surges in tattooing globally, especially in England.

For a process that was initially heralded as barbaric and unfit for Western living, it’s somewhat remarkable how quickly the status quo shifted regarding tattooing in Europe. As soon as a handful of British rulers and lords received tattoos, including the Prince of Wales and King Edward VII, tattooing became a major trend among the higher class of England. Naval officers and seamen had been receiving tattoos for years already, though Japanese tattooing became the most sought-after style, mostly due to the novelty of the style as well as the incredible quality of artistry exhibited by the tattoo artists from Japan (Gilbert, 2000). British sailors would often receive tattoos with names or images of people or places back home before they embarked on lengthy voyages at sea, reinforcing the trend of tattoos as a form of memorializing important people or events in the life of the individual.
As for rulers and other high-class individuals, the focus seemed to remain on artistry and skill rather than meaning (Gilbert, 2000).

A British artist named D.W. Purdy opened a tattoo parlor in North London around 1870, making him the first major British tattoo artist of record (Gilbert, 2000). His freehand designs were mostly focused on major landmarks and symbols of British life, a patriotic trend that British military members soon adapted to fit their way of life (Scutt & Gotch, 1986). Ranking officers went so far as to suggest soldiers receive tattoos of their regiment insignia as a means of inspiring comradery and making it easier to tally deaths and injuries in combat (Scutt & Gotch, 1986). It seems that the trend in warrior tribes of using tattoos as markings of warrior status carried over to Western life, though it is unclear if the British knew they were continuing this pattern or if they believed it to be original and unique to them.

Many tattoo artists from the period rose to fame through British military tattooing, oftentimes being former soldiers who received tattoos themselves. The invention of the electric tattooing machine in 1890 (Figure 16) led to an influx in tattoo artists, as well as greater skill and precision seen among the current artists of the generation (Parry, 1933).

For as clever of an invention as the electric tattoo machine was, medical complications because of tattooing were still a major concern, and for good reason. Infections were rather common, and tattooing certainly wasn’t any cleaner than any other medical operation in the mid-1800s. Several physicians and surgeons in France were the main source of information on these complications, detailing issues such as syphilis and
various other blood infections (Berchon, 1869). Reusing needles for multiple clients, mixing ink with spit, and “cleaning” a fresh tattoo with urine or other toxic irritants were all common practices in tattooing during the mid to late 1800s (Berchon, 1869; Gilbert, 2000). These complications eventually became enough of a problem that the French Navy and Army both forbade tattooing among their ranks, forcing tattoo artists to revert to tattooing prisoners only. It was around this time that studies began to emerge analyzing the relationship between criminality and tattooing (Ferrero, 1911). The appearance of scientific literature regarding the popular stereotype that tattooing and criminality were inherently linked together once again helped reinforce the stigma around tattooing that would remain hard to shake for decades to come.

Figure 16. Original patent form for the electric tattoo machine, invented by Samuel F. O'Reilly. Circa 1891.
Finally, we come to tattooing in the United States. Much like the composition of the country itself, tattooing styles and methods seem to be something of a melting pot resulting from influences from all around the globe (Gilbert, 2000). Many of the themes present in tattooing in the U.S. revolve around patriotic imagery and other military-related designs. Tattooing existed among Native Americans well before this, with designs again focused around spiritual imagery and meaning (Gilbert, 2000), but the process of Westernization was the real catalyst for tattooing catching on in the U.S. and abroad. Heavily tattooed individuals were frequently used as circus attractions (Figure 17), but these individuals certainly weren’t the “standard” image of tattooing in the United States. Charlie Wagner (Figure 18) made quite a name for himself by tattooing “attractions,” though he also refined and improved the original electric tattoo machine patent (Nyssen, 2018).

Soldiers and seamen, more than anyone else, explored the world and spread stories and examples of tattooing wherever they landed. As a result, port cities across the Western world became hotbeds for tattooing, legal or otherwise. By the beginning of the 20th century, tattoo parlors pervaded the majority of cities within the United States, with
artists like Lew Alberts designing and refining the “American traditional” style of tattoo that thrives to this day (Parry, 1933). It’s not exactly shocking that this American traditional style revolved once again around nautical military themes, as somewhere close to 80 percent of men in the United States Navy had at least one tattoo by 1900 (Gilbert, 2000). The tattoos were supposedly marks of bravery and dedication to their role as soldiers (Fellowes, 1971), though some designs also centered around protecting the men during their lives of danger (Parry, 1933).

Tattooing became a prominent facet of modern life in the late 1950s through the 1970s. As our ability to communicate with more of the world increased, so did our visibility of prominent celebrities, political figures, and social movements. Body art as a whole progressed from something exclusive to sailors, circus performers, and criminals to celebrities and, perhaps more importantly, just regular people. The inception of social movements such as modern feminism and punk led to a massive influx of tattooing, as individuals sought out something “deviant” and highly visible as a mark of solidifying the self and asserting their individuality (Schildkrout, 2004). As new artists
entered the field and trained multiple apprentices, the access and feasibility of tattooing spread globally and something that had previously been seen as exotic and unattainable very quickly became accessible. With a quick shift in tattoo imagery, clientele, and access to artistry, the 1950s-1970s was a period in which a veritable “tattoo renaissance” was in full effect (Rubin, 1988). Artists were able to travel quicker and farther, studying new styles of artwork and mastering styles that had previously been limited to their respective corners of the globe. As the success of the artist flourished, the public perception around tattooing began to shift into a place of greater acceptance and appreciation (Tucker, 1981). When the American Museum of Natural History hosted an exhibit on both modern and historical body art within the West and abroad (in the mid 1960s), even press outlets hailed tattooing as being part of mainstream society (Schildkrout, 2004).

As we have seen through this examination of history, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when, where, or how tattooing became a form of coping or remembrance. From sailors embarking on dangerous journeys to cultures where tattooing was an integral part of the individual and collective identity, there is no singular usage for tattoos. The word “coping” didn’t emerge in relation to tattooing throughout history (at least not explicitly), though I have highlighted various instances where tattooing was used to permanently mark reminders of people (like European sailors) or values important to individuals and communities (like Samoan island tattooing). Tattooing is an art form where evolution and growth blends with tradition and honoring the past, and in the next chapter, we will take a closer look at how tattooing is changing around us today. With new art styles, tattooing
technology, and greater freedom to experiment and push the boundaries of what the medium can achieve, tattooing in the modern world is as diverse and relevant as it has ever been.
Chapter Two: Tattooing Today, Cultural Differences & New Contexts

Figure 19. A client recovering from a session with the Brutal Black Tattoo Project.

Figure 20. One of the "Dazzling Dozen" women featured in Inked Magazine showing off her post-mastectomy tattoos.
Tattooing in the modern world is as diverse and full of innovative ideas as the world itself. There have been a plethora of new art styles emerging at rates previously unseen, especially with the rise of the internet, and tattoos are as much a fashion accessory now as piercings or clothes. As one might expect, there is no universal norm for tattoos and who gets them, where they get them, or why, but we are seeing new patterns and trends emerge. Even with such a focus on novelty and innovation, there are still parts of the world where tattoos are rooted in tradition. As part of the examination into tattooing and coping in the world today, we’ll consider how various cultures and subgroups are using tattooing and their justifications and explanations for what coping means to them.

Given that tattooing has a checkered past in terms of medical consequences (i.e. blood infections), it’s somewhat ironic that one of the more groundbreaking uses of tattooing today is related to medical assistance. More specifically, tattoos can serve as markers on an individual for medical professionals to see and use during an emergency (Figure 21). The tattoo can be used as a signal to first responders who might otherwise have to wait for medical information before acting knowledgably on a patient. For example, if someone is allergic to penicillin, they might design a tattoo that is easily visible so that medical professionals don’t unintentionally harm them in the process of treatment. Beyond just a practical use (e.g., alerting professionals to pre-existing decisions and conditions), marking oneself artistically in this way can be seen as another form of embracing a
difficult or unpleasant aspect of one’s own being and personalizing it in a way that the
individual chooses, rather than having it forced on them.

Another exciting (and very new) horizon in medical tattooing is nano-tattoos, or
tattoos that interact with chemicals in the body in real time
to provide the wearer with information on their body
chemistry. These tattoos and the technology behind them
are still in their infancy, but the prospects have drawn
public attention. Individuals with diabetes are one group
that will benefit from this new technology, as biosensors
in the bloodstream can cause the ink in a nano-tattoo to
change color based on the person’s glucose levels
(Oberhaus, 2017). Similarly, temporary nano-tattoos can
assist in monitoring safe alcohol consumption. These
nano-tattoos utilize a process called iontophoresis to
induce perspiration, allowing the nano-tattoo to read
alcohol levels in the body via electrical readings from
sweat. The nano-tattoo then sends information to an
individual’s smartphone regarding how much they’ve had to drink (BAC levels) and
when to stop drinking if they intend on driving home (Geere, 2016; Oberhaus, 2017). It’s
rather remarkable that tattooing has become acceptable and desirable to the point where
we are finding ways to make the practice useful beyond pure aesthetics. Tattoos are

Figure 22. Appearance of eyebrows
during several different phases of the
tattooing process.
becoming practical for monitoring health and body chemistry, a development that is potentially life-saving for individuals with chronic illness.

For as much focus as we have placed on tattooing as art and highlighting major stylistic pieces, we can also see that tattooing can be used in ways that are designed to go unnoticed. Tattooing has extended into the world of cosmetics by way of makeup and hair (Figure 22), with (typically) women seeking treatments that allow them to tattoo permanent shades of makeup or eyebrows. A drawback of these treatments is that they often require multiple sessions and need to be reapplied every two years or so. It can be argued that the time it saves on a day-to-day basis is worth the infrequent touch-up work, though. With an estimated cost of $400-850 for two years of makeup materials (Martell, 2017), the cost of a tattoo seems a bit more reasonable, despite the sometimes-uncomfortable application and healing process.

Building on small cosmetic-related tattoos, medical and lay professionals can now use tattooing to reapply an individual’s natural skin tone on heavily damaged patches of skin. A woman by the name of Basma Hameed has been the biggest pioneer in this type of tattooing, after a personal experience...
left her searching for the service that she now provides. When she was two years old, her brother spilled hot cooking oil on her face, leaving facial scarring from third degree burns across 40% of her face (Driscoll, 2014). Through experimenting on herself and developing the methods she uses now, she was able to reapply her natural skin tone over her scars, and now she offers similar services to individuals seeking treatment for burns, mastectomies, surgical scars, and other skin disturbances (Figures 23 & 24).

Tattooing can often be thought of as marking oneself in order to stand out or putting an artistic statement on the body to draw the eye, but the usage of tattooing to help an individual feel “normal” again and simply blend in societally is a remarkable new avenue within the medium.

Perhaps the most widely publicized form of medical tattooing seen in the U.S. today is related to breast cancer survivors who seek areola reconstruction or an artistic tattoo to cover scars from mastectomy procedures.

With several magazine campaigns (Figures 25 & 26) and various artists and tattoo parlors
highlighted as part of this new practice, this style of tattooing is clearly having a positive effect on the recipients. One artist detailed his ideas behind this type of work by saying,

The women with breast cancer with whom I work share a feeling that they’ve been acted upon—by cancer, the health industrial complex and its agents, the sequelae of their treatments. Their physical and psychological points of reference are destabilized, having changed so quickly. A successful tattooing experience establishes a new point of reference, a marker that’s intimately theirs that replaces their sense of rupture and damage with an act of creation and, in my work, images of natural life. (Allen, 2017, p. 672)

The tattoo functions as not only a visible marker of triumph over a life-threatening disease, but also as an indicator that the individual is once again firmly in control of their body and their destiny. As one woman said, “It’s that little bit of reclaiming what cancer took away from me. It’s taking my body back,” (R, 2017). Another woman mentioned, “I’m actually grateful that I went through this because I get to share my experience. I get to help empower women to be aware and be a part of their treatment,” (R, 2017). Another viewpoint expressed by Allen (2017) revolves around his decision to tattoo organic imagery rather than simply reconstructing the nipple: in his eyes, the new art should reflect a change in the woman he is tattooing, as he sees that these women don’t want to create an imitation of who they were before their cancer experience. The disease and their journey with it has changed them, and Allen, as an artist, wants to honor that change through a new image on the breast, rather than recreating what once was.
In addition to women who choose an artistic representation of their cancer experience, there are also a substantial number of women who do wish to look how they once did. These women typically seek out areola tattoos after mastectomy and breast reconstruction surgeries. In a broad sample of 151 women who had received nipple-areola tattoos, Spear and Arias (1995) found that 83% of their respondents reported that they were satisfied with their tattoos. Just under 10% of the respondents had touch-up work performed to account for fading, and all of those who did touch-up work said they were satisfied with their tattoos. Out of all respondents, only 7 individuals had medical issues resulting from the tattoo or the chemicals in the pigments, indicating that this practice is largely safe for a sensitive, cancer-treated area (Spear & Arias, 1995).
While nipple-areola tattooing is available from various medical professionals and some professional tattoo artists, the journey for closure and quality work brings many to a man named Vinnie Myers, a tattoo artist operating just outside of Baltimore, Maryland (Figures 27 & 28). Women from all over the world come to Vinnie’s shop to receive nipple-areola reconstruction tattoos from a man who has tattooed thousands of them over the past decade (Kiernan, 2014). While certain breast reconstruction surgeons are trained to do these types of tattoos, Myers discovered that their limited training in accurately tattooing skin tone was leaving breast cancer survivors with unrealistic and poorly done tattoos that called even more attention to their changed bodies. As Myers focused his time and talent on nipple-areola reconstruction tattoos, he became disenchanted with doing the same style of tattoo day in and day out. However, he recommitted himself to the practice when his sister called him to let him know that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer as well. With video and journalism coverage from the TODAY show, the New York Times, and various other sources, Myers has become the go-to source for areola reconstruction tattoos. Whether it be through an artistic tattoo or an anatomically accurate one, this practice of working with breast cancer survivors is a much-needed method of self-expression based on control and body acceptance after a traumatic experience.
Clearly, medical tattooing has come quite far in recent years, though it is not the only element of tattooing that has seen growth. One of these expansion areas revolves around the traditional idea of tattooing as an experience or ritual, and there is perhaps no more extreme example than the Brutal Black Project (Figures 29 & 30). The artists behind the project insist that their work during a session is designed to push people to their limits and far beyond them, creating a space in which clients can discover how committed they really are to the rite of passage (Kaviani, 2017). One of the main artists behind the project, Cammy Stewart, elaborated on this idea in an interview with VICE, saying, “The project is not always about the outcome; it’s about the process. Taking things back to the primitive, the rite of passage. Pushing the limits of your inner self. How much do you want something? Can you see it through to the end? The marks left from the tattoo are only a reminder of what you learned about yourself during the process. To me, the marks left in skin are less important than the marks left in your mind,” (Kaviani, 2017). His partner in the project, Valerio Cancellier, added to these ideas: “Brutal Black recalls you to the primitive

Figure 29. A client resting during a session with the Brutal Black Tattoo Project.
brutality that was screwed up by modernity. There are lots of other violent tribal rituals that could also be described as survival trials. Although the project is not a remembrance of tribal rituals, its energy has the same kind of origins,” (Kaviani, 2017).

According to the creators of the Brutal Black Project, their project was in part a reaction to what they saw as a modern culture of tattooing, watered down and devoid of ritual or emotional meaning (Kaviani, 2017). As tattooing has become more popular, it’s fair to say that there is a level of commercialization behind it that didn’t exist before. As something becomes more widely available, it can also lose some luster and part of the power and uniqueness that it carried when it was more limited and difficult to obtain. In that vein, tattooing has certainly become more of an aesthetic feature than one with exclusively cultural or religious meaning, though tattoos like that certainly still exist. From that standpoint, the Brutal Black Project makes sense as a reclamation of tradition and as a practice centered around experience rather than outcome, though it is certainly jarring to see the sheer (for lack of a better word) brutality behind the application of the tattoo. There is minimal modern research on the role of pain in rituals, though it is entirely possible, as described by the creators, that the intense pain of the session is cathartic for
some. While medically sterile and conducted with modern tattoo machines, the Brutal Black Project is intense and debilitating in the short-term, and the healing process likely results in scarring and other aftercare difficulties arising from a break-free 4-hour session. The process of getting a tattoo is ritualistic on its own for some people, and that pain is likely enough, but the Brutal Black Project examines the extreme side of pain-based rituals in that spectrum. How useful such a ritual is in the modern world is up for debate, though it is hard to deny the power in the images alone, regardless of the process.

Shifting our gaze to another cultural “bubble” of tattooing, one of the largest communities of individuals with tattoos that we see is within the walls of prisons, with about 15% to 32% of (primarily male) inmates in the United States having at least one tattoo (Palermo, 2004). It certainly seems that tattooing has a higher prevalence in prison environments because it is a clear and concrete way for individuals to emphasize that they are unique in a system where prisoners often feel like a statistic or a number without agency or independence (DeMello, 1993). Alternatively, we also see that many prison tattoos mark a collective belonging to a deviant or criminal lifestyle (Figure 31), sometimes symbolizing a specific gang or group (DeMello, 1993; Taylor, 1970). Another unique facet of criminal tattooing is the placement of the tattoos, in that areas of the body like the neck and face are typically locations where criminal tattoos are more common, such as teardrops near the eyes to symbolize the number of murders committed by the individual bearing the tattoo (DeMello, 1993; Taylor, 1970). Tattooing was considered
criminal and deviant for many years, as we learned in chapter one, and while there is no definite link between criminality and tattooing, some psychological research does suggest a correlation between tattooing and behaviors associated with criminality, namely self-indulgence (Walters, 1990).

In terms of specific art style, it seems that inmates who choose to receive tattoos with offensive or antisocial messages, or images (Figure 32), are more likely to create issues with authority within prisons (Rozycki Lozano, Morgan, Murray & Varghese, 2011). Additionally, they are also more likely to reoffend and end up back in prison (Rozycki Lozano, Morgan, Murray & Varghese, 2011). As tattooing overall has expanded in popularity and social acceptance, it would make sense for tattooing rates among prisoners to rise as well. What might be worth further investigation is the specific link between criminality and tattooing. For example, it may be that tattoos reflect a stronger connection to one’s criminal group, which increases likelihood of behavior. Gang tattoos can serve as reminders of the individual’s commitment to the gang, a bond that can be difficult (and potentially fatal) to ignore. It may also be that the tattoo creates cognitive dissonance which increases criminality; when a criminal lifestyle is all you know, trying to reconcile
that past with an unknown future can be extraordinarily difficult for an individual to process. Lifestyle changes, no matter how major, are difficult to implement and even harder to maintain. Wearing a permanent reminder of a former lifestyle can only make it harder to shake off and move forward.

Offering tattoo removal for inmates upon their release may help lower rates of recidivism and potentially help inmates remove stigma (e.g., increasing chances of employment). Just as tattoos can be symbolic or meaningful upon their completion, it is entirely possible that the removal of certain tattoos can have a similar effect if they are reminders of a period of criminality or deviance. A nonprofit named Jails to Jobs says that their online directory of tattoo removal services is, by far, the most visited page of their website (Rayasam, 2015). With more than 200 tattoo removal services available for little or no cost in nearly 40 states, it is becoming more feasible for individuals with a criminal past to start over and reintegrate with society. This thesis focuses mainly on how tattooing can help an individual cope and make positive changes in their own life, but it is worth noting that tattoos in the right context can have an adverse effect as well.
A tattoo is a permanent alteration to an individual’s body, and the individual receiving one must have complete agency in the decision to get a tattoo. Forcing a permanent change on someone, physical or otherwise, can be a dehumanizing act with long-lasting ramifications. The Holocaust is a period of history defined by dehumanizing events, and tattooing was part of that experience for many people. Upon arrival at a concentration camp, inmates were stripped of their clothes and possessions before being stripped of their identities and tattooed with a number on their forearms. These numbers were the only identification that inmates were allowed to bear, and it is one of the most notorious uses of tattooing in the modern world. If there was ever a tattoo that could be considered adverse to an individual’s psychological health, this would be the case. However, some of the survivors of the Holocaust, as well as their descendants, have made the decision to re-contextualize their forced tattoos and transform them into one of the most unique and powerful examples we see of tattoos as remembrance (Figure 33). Individuals who are related to Holocaust survivors tattoo the same identification numbers.
on their forearms that their ancestors received in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. In addition to reminding themselves and others of their personal connection to the Holocaust, these individuals don these tattoos as a form of larger remembrance for one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the world. The recipients of the tattoos state that they chose to receive the tattoo to honor the survivors who have already passed, as much a marker to the event as it is to those who survived it (Brouwer & Horwitz, 2015). We’ve spent a lot of time focusing on how and why individuals use tattoos to cope with or mark difficult events in their own personal narrative (e.g., surviving breast cancer), but this case demonstrates that tattoos can serve as monuments to both individual and collective experiences. Tattoos with this type of dual representation of the self and the collective are powerful examples of how the artistry of tattoos can be meaningful on several different levels and to a great number of people. It’s a powerful way of keeping memories and important messages alive, as personal and painful as they may be.
While Holocaust-related tattoos may seem to be the most drastic and direct example of collective coping, we see it more often than we think. One prime example is the viral semicolon tattoo. A woman named Amy Bleuel started Project Semicolon, a nonprofit born out of a simple interpretation of a punctuation mark then translated into a tattoo (Figure 34). The tattoo is meant to symbolize solidarity for individuals struggling with mental health issues and suicidal ideation or self-injury, with the idea that a human being can choose to continue their life, despite all their pain, rather than ending it altogether (Willard, 2015). A semicolon is meant to indicate a pause, rather than an ending, and the tattoo embodies a similar meaning. It’s a message that has clearly resonated across the United States, with thousands of individuals choosing to receive the tattoo as a mark of their own struggle and to remind themselves and others that mental wellness is a battle we will always be fighting. Additionally, it’s a reminder that people struggling with depression and other afflictions need aid and empathy, something we can often forget in our everyday lives. We could interpret this type of self-expression as a sort of proactive coping, where a tattoo serves the role of reminding an individual of their own struggles (or those of a loved one) while developing a positive and encouraging message around their design that challenges themselves and others to work harder to prevent pain like this in the future. While they cope with their
own struggles, they advocate for themselves and others in an empowering, self-guided manner to prevent anyone having to cope with a trauma like their own in the future. A constant visual reminder of a painful narrative event may sound like a rather punishing thing to do to oneself, but stories like this highlight how the tattoo doesn’t always symbolize trauma alone; it can bear hope and optimism as well.

Tattooing has expanded in ways no one could have ever predicted, with advances in modern medicine and technology creating new opportunities for tattoos to positively influence lives. We’ve examined tattooing as a coping mechanism in a few different areas, but to truly understand something as intimate as tattooing, a more intimate lens is necessary. With that in mind, I designed a study to examine tattooing and its uses, inspirations, and meanings within a sample of Regis University undergraduate students.
Chapter Three: Examining Tattooing Within Regis University:

A Qualitative Study
As part of the examination into the relationship between tattooing and coping, I set out to design a survey with questions asking for participant information, ranging from race and gender to familial messages about tattooing and their personal reasons for receiving a tattoo. The purpose of the survey was twofold: to collect and analyze demographic information as it relates to the decision to be tattooed, and to analyze the reasoning itself for choosing a tattoo. Questions in the survey included “How would you describe the types of messages you received from your family regarding tattooing?” and “Do you have a significant reason for getting your tattoo?” Rationale for asking for this information is reflected in the earlier sections and in the hypotheses, listed below.

In addition to the survey, we invited a subset of respondents to meet with me to further discuss their personal tattoos and the inspirations behind them. My questions were designed to ask for details around the tattoos and their meaning more than the events that inspired them. Questions included “What role did the tattoo play in your overall coping?” “How has it helped?” and “What influenced your design choices and body placement?”

**Hypotheses**

1. 1a. Based on previous research investigating the role that self-expression can play in symptom reduction and successful individual coping with stressful life events (Smyth, 1998; Thomas & Kennedy, 1995), I hypothesized that participants would describe tattooing as a useful coping strategy.

1b. However, I also hypothesized that tattoos as a means of coping would only be prevalent in individuals who were exposed to positive messages and opinions regarding tattooing, while individuals who grew up in an
environment where tattoos were heavily stigmatized would be less drawn to them as a means of coping.

2. I hypothesized a significant difference between reasons for tattooing in older and younger participants, in that older participants, on average, would list coping as a reason for tattooing more often than younger participants.

3. Finally, follow up interviews were used for exploratory purposes with a goal of further elucidating specific inspirations and motivations behind people’s tattoos. I asked participants questions regarding the design and placement of their tattoo, the role the tattoo played in their overall coping, and how they feel the tattoo might reflect their identity(ies).

**Methods**

**Participants**

A survey was distributed to the entire Regis University undergraduate student community, approximately 1,400 people. The only exclusionary criteria for participants were they must be over the age of 18 and they must have at least one tattoo. If the individual taking the survey did not have a tattoo, I provided the opportunity for them to pass the survey on to someone who did have a tattoo and who might be interested in being part of the research, a form of snowball sampling. In total, I collected survey responses from 160 individuals, with eight of those same respondents agreeing to the follow-up interview portion of the study. Of note, all participants who began the survey completed it.
Materials

Survey. Participants completed a survey containing questions regarding demographics, such as age and religious background, as well as items related to participant opinions on tattooing as a whole, and in regard to their own tattoos. Example items included, “How would you describe the types of messages you received from your family regarding tattooing?” and “Do you consider yourself a religious person?” The survey ended with a few questions focused more directly on the idea of tattoos as a coping mechanism such as, “Do you believe that a tattoo would be an effective form of coping for you or someone that you are close with?” (Appendix B).

Interview. Participants that chose to be a part of a follow-up interview were asked about their tattoo inspiration and the role of tattooing in their personal coping (Appendix D).

Procedure

An approved consent form was provided for all participants. For participants who followed the link included in the initial recruitment email (Appendix A), it is assumed that they agreed to participate in the survey part of the study. All necessary, IRB-approved consent information was included in the recruitment email. Participants in the follow-up interview received a different consent form with information regarding audio recording and transcription (Appendix C). The initial survey (Appendix B) could be completed at a time and place of the participants’ choosing. About halfway through the survey, there were two questions asking if the participant had a tattoo or if they knew anyone who had a tattoo. If the answer to both of these questions was “no,” they were
thanked for their participation in the survey and we asked that they send the survey link to anyone they know who is qualified and who might be interested in participating in the research.

At the end of the survey, I asked if the participant was willing to complete a follow-up interview in person with the researcher, and if they said yes, they were redirected to a page where they provided a name and an email address for the researcher to contact them. If the participant did not agree to a follow-up interview, the survey ended and the participant was thanked for their participation. The debriefing form for survey participants (Appendix E) was available for them to view at this point.

For participants who agreed to a follow-up interview, I contacted them via their provided email address within a week to set up a time and location for the follow-up interview. As described above, I used a numerical code for all participants' data that couldn’t be identified with them, and their names were not recorded on data forms. This information has not been reported and has been kept confidential and used for linking purposes only. Participants were instructed to choose a location that allowed for privacy and comfort, with the option of meeting in the Regis University Psychology and Neuroscience Testing rooms. Allowing participants to choose where the interview was conducted ensured that the interview was convenient for the participant, in addition to establishing comfort and privacy for a discussion on a potentially personal subject.

At the end of the follow-up interview, participants were provided a copy of the interview-specific debriefing form (Appendix F) and I addressed any questions they might have had. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality measures established to
ensure that none of their personal information or answers could be linked back to them. With that in mind, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves for the purpose of quoting them and using their information in the final thesis and research presentation.

**Analyses**

I calculated frequencies of answers from both the survey and the open-ended interviews. For example, I calculated the frequency of responses for each “reason for tattooing.” Standard descriptive statistics were also run to calculate basic demographic statistics such as average participant age, frequencies of ethnicities, and so on. For analysis regarding hypothesis 1a, the frequency of participants who said yes to a question asking about their views on using tattooing as a coping mechanism was calculated.

For analysis regarding hypothesis 1b, a chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated to assess the relationship between family messages regarding tattooing (positive, negative, or neutral) and the participant’s openness to using tattooing as a coping method (open or not open).

For statistical analyses regarding hypothesis 2, I computed an independent measures t-test calculation to compare the mean age of the participants who answered yes to coping versus those who answered no to coping.

Given that the follow-up interviews were designed to be exploratory, I did not develop specific hypotheses for these questions. Instead, I looked for general connections and trends across the interviews consistent with qualitative methods utilized by McNeill and Firman (2014) in a similar exploratory study. For example, when asking the question
“What inspired your tattoo?”, I coded responses by source of origin for inspiration (i.e., person, place, or event). Consistent with Krafchick, Schindler, Haddock and Banning (2005), I built the coding scheme based on implicit and explicit references to sources of tattoo inspiration and art design. For example, an explicit reference to a source of tattoo inspiration could be “I got this tattoo because of my mother’s death when I was 17.” An implicit reference could be something like, “I got this tattoo because my mom used to love this symbol and it makes me think of her.” An explicit statement regarding tattoo art style could be something like “This is a Japanese style tattoo.” An implicit statement regarding tattoo art style might be “There’s a Koi fish and some color in this tattoo.” Implicit references were coded based on traditional design elements of various tattoo styles (Japanese, tribal, American traditional, etc.). A breakdown of coding procedures can be found in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo Source of Origin</td>
<td>Person, Place, Event</td>
<td>“I have an anchor tattoo on my ankle and I got it because my Grandpa passed away.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Implicit or Explicit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Style</td>
<td>Japanese, American</td>
<td>“The style of tattoo I have is American traditional.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional, etc. (Implicit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or Explicit Reference)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>How has it helped?</td>
<td>“It just like made me feel like I had closure... a really nice reminder that I’ve gotten through this once and I can do it again”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

In total, 160 undergraduate students responded to the survey. Nearly 80% of respondents identified as female, with the average age of respondents being 19.86 years (SD = 1.98). Most (69.61%) respondents identified as White/European American, with the next largest percentages being respondents who identified as Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx (18.23%) and Asian American (6.08%). Catholicism and unaffiliated/agnostic beliefs were the most frequently reported religious affiliations (both 33.33%, respectively). Half of the respondents (52.55%) cited “commemorating a person, place, or event” as the primary reason they received one or more of their tattoos. Other reasons included “just for fun” (17.52%) and “religious/spiritual reasons” (9.49%). Of respondents, 16.06% listed “other” as their primary reasoning behind receiving a tattoo, including quotes from music or books and reminders/motivational reasons.

Approximately 42% of respondents had a tattoo for coping related reasons, while nearly 80% of respondents said they knew someone who had a coping-related tattoo.

Inconsistent with Hypothesis 2, there was no difference in average age between respondents who did have a coping related tattoo and those who did not, t(159) = 1.06, p > .05.

Survey results showed that 59.87% of respondents said that the messages around tattooing they received from family were either “very” or “somewhat negative,” while 72.61% of respondents cited that the messages they received from peers regarding tattooing were either “somewhat” or “very positive.” In regard to hypothesis 1b, results differed from the original prediction. A chi-square goodness of fit test revealed no
significant interaction between family messages about tattooing and participant openness to tattooing as a form of coping, $\chi^2(3, n = 135) = 0.128, p > .05$. Participants who reported that the messages they received from family members regarding tattooing were negative were no more or less likely to be open to tattooing as a coping mechanism than participants who reported more positive family messages.

Interviews highlighted a myriad of inspirations, art styles, and coping strategies associated with tattooing. Of the eight individuals interviewed, seven agreed that their tattoo(s) helped them cope with difficult events in their personal narratives (Table 3). When asked to elaborate on how specifically the tattoo had helped, six of the participants said that their tattoos were “reminders” of positive influences in their own lives, of what they had survived and could survive again, and of people or events that had inspired their tattoos. One participant, Leia, said, “I would say it reminds me of the hard times in my life and that I got through them, and I’m able to look at it and be reminded of that.”

Similarly, a participant named Marisa mentioned that the tattoo helped her process a period of depression in her life, saying, “I think that it was kind of a signifier that I had made it out.” Another major theme found through the interviews was “motivation,” in that individuals considered their tattoo a visible reminder to stay positive in difficult times. A participant named Garrett touched on this, noting, “If anything happens, or if you’re having a bad day, it’s just a reminder not to get down.”

There was no particularly dominant art style across participant tattoos, though most participants seemed to choose an art style that they felt represented their motivations behind the tattoo. For example, a participant named Kyle said that he chose
American Traditional for his tattoo because, “I think the symbolism of American traditional really helps me find my identity but also the fact that people who have a lot of tattoos are often considered outcasts, like I’ve always been considered an outcast in my life, so I find a lot of identity in that feeling.” Another participant, Leia, said she chose the design of a feather turning into birds because, “it’s something that stays on the earth that can fly away.” A participant named Cinnamon chose her original design of a lion head because her friend who passed away had always wanted a lion tattoo, and this specific tattoo was meant to honor him. Further details on art styles can be found in Table 2.

One interesting trend that appeared in two of the interviews was the importance of physical pain in the coping process. Kyle made a point of telling me that, “The pain of the tattoo is almost clarifying. It almost voids everything else you have going on at the moment and you just focus on the tattoo.” Leia reported a similar theme when asked about what role the tattoo played in overall coping, stating that, “I feel like it helped me cope because I was able to channel my pain into something physical because it hurt, and I feel like you can’t normally tell people ‘hey, I’m in pain’ when you’ve lost someone because there’s no specific place for it, but there was a specific place to get a tattoo and a specific place where that pain would be channeled.”

Lastly, the theme of reclaiming control and dominion over one’s own body is a theme that has appeared throughout this thesis, including in the interview process. One participant, Marisa, elaborated on this theme: “Your body holds all of your stories so for my identity, I guess not just being able to hold it on the inside of my soul and everything
but being able to confidently put it on my body because I feel brave enough to let people know and make it more meaningful, and make that journey of my life permanent.”

Another participant, Sofie, described a similar thought process: “I believe that feeling comfortable in your own body is super important and I feel that the tattoos...well they are a part of your own body, and they add to who I am and they kind of have their own story and memory that goes along with them.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Pseudonym</th>
<th>Tattoo Source of Origin</th>
<th>Tattoo Art Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Person + Place</td>
<td>Stick and Poke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon</td>
<td>Person + Event</td>
<td>Black &amp; Grey, Text (Quote)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Black &amp; Grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Watercolor, Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Person + Event</td>
<td>American Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leia</td>
<td>Person + Event</td>
<td>Black &amp; Grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Text (Quote)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofie</td>
<td>Person + Event</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. *Information on the role tattoos played in coping of interviewees.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Pseudonym</th>
<th>Did the tattoo help you cope?</th>
<th>How did it help?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motivational Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motivational Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motivational Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Reminder of pride in a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Pain, Identity Reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Pain, Motivational Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Motivational Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofie</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Commemorate Person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Four: Moving Forward
It’s an arduous task, trying to encapsulate all the information and analysis behind a practice that exists across so many cultures and contexts. It would be virtually impossible for me to make any accurate blanket statements regarding the relationship between tattooing and coping, as it is a highly subjective practice, but there are some conclusions we can draw from the study conducted within Regis University. Among other findings, the major takeaway from this data is that using tattoos for commemoration or remembrance is a trend that is still alive and well.

The demographical statistics are worth examining briefly for their potential impact on the outcome of this study. In a sample with nearly 80% female respondents, there are potential limitations on the generalizability of this study. However, this percentage is somewhat consistent with the larger population of women students at Regis University (60%; U.S. News, 2017) and other North American surveys about tattoos. For example, the Harris Poll (Braverman, 2012) surveyed roughly 2,000 adults in the US and found that women were more likely than men to be tattooed (23% versus 19%, respectively). A tattoo survey distributed throughout three cities in Canada had a similar response rate to this study even in a much larger sample: of the 1,270 respondents, 82% were female and 72% were 25 years of age or younger (Paphitis, Croteau, Davenport, Walters, & Durk, 2015).

As for the racial/ethnic diversity within our study, the results once again align with other studies run with much larger samples. The Harris Poll data reflected that 30% of respondents identified as Hispanic, 21% identified as African American, and 20% identified as Caucasian (Braverman, 2012). Our percentage distribution was slightly
different compared to this data, but those three racial groups were the most represented in the study here as well. Additionally, the Pew Research Center, using data from US Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics, reported that 58% of 18-24-year-olds enrolled in an undergraduate program in the United States are white, 19% are Hispanic, and 14% are African American (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). Our racial distribution is a natural consequence of conducting research in a university setting, meaning our data likely holds some generalizability power within the demographic we assessed.

For hypothesis 1b, the results deviated from my expectations. Regardless of the tone of the messages, I found no relationship between messages shared by family members and an individual’s decision to be tattooed. The messages from friends regarding tattooing were significantly more positive overall when compared to family messages, and my interview with Anna reinforced that idea, as she revealed that her tattoo was inspired and applied by a close friend. A study by Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, and Koch (2004) found that, for college students in the US, family had “very little influence” on the decision to receive a tattoo or a body piercing, while friends were listed as having a “strong influence” on these same decisions. A separate study by Dickson, Dukes, Smith, & Strapko (2015) found that only 12.4% of surveyed college students reported that their fear of parental disapproval stopped them from getting a tattoo. Additionally, I computed another chi-square equation to assess the relationship between peer messages and openness to tattooing and found statistical significance, $\chi^2(3, n=135) = 4.2442, p < .05$. However, one of the groups included in this calculation had less than five
responses, leading me to calculate a Fisher Exact Test to account for the small sample size. The Fisher Exact Test revealed no statistical significance in the findings regarding peer messages and openness to tattooing as a coping mechanism, $p > .05$. The limited sample size certainly impacted the data collected here, though the number of respondents who cited tattooing as useful coping mechanism is promising. Further research into how peer and family messages impact different decisions made by an individual may be worth pursuing in further research.

Tattooing is an inherently personal form of self-expression, and I vastly overestimated the potential impact that a family member might have on an individual’s willingness to express themselves in that way. Given that this data is collected from college students, it makes sense that friends would be more influential in this process, since college students are much more likely to be around friends on an everyday basis. College is also a major time of transition and growth, where the individual experiences independence in a way that they likely never have before (Arnett, 2000). As part of establishing that identity and independence, it’s logical that the decision to be tattooed is made more on an individual level. Friends and peers are both around the individual more often and they are sharing in that same period of transition, potentially making them a more “reputable” source of influence to an individual at that time.

Hypothesis 2 evaluated the difference in average age between participants with a coping related tattoo and participants without a coping related tattoo. I hypothesized that older participants would have more coping related tattoos than younger participants, but there was no significant difference in the average ages. The Harris Poll data tells us that
adults between 30-39 years of age were the most likely to have tattoos (coping related or otherwise), even more so than adults between 25-29 or 18-24 years of age (Braverman, 2012). Additionally, the survey data from Papfitis et al. (2015) shows that individuals are more likely to have tattoos as age increases. The hypothesis proposed for this study was sound, according to the background literature, so it is likely that the participant pool surveyed was simply too young to generate a similar result. The survey in this study was distributed to only the undergraduate population of Regis University, limiting the age range of respondents to between 18-24 years of age (only one respondent was older than 30). This hypothesis might hold true in a broader sample, so it is worth pursuing and reevaluating in later studies.

The data gathered in the interview portion of the study highlighted several common themes and topics that align with what the background literature revealed. Motivation and reminders of positive life influences were the most common reasons behind participant tattoos, and most were inspired by the death of an important figure in the individual’s life. Several participants mentioned that the ability to see their tattoo and look at it was important to them for staying optimistic and appreciating what they had been through.

One of the themes found throughout interviews was the idea of establishing or reaffirming control and ownership over the individual’s body. Establishing control and reminding the individual of their strength and autonomy is a vital piece of the coping and recovery process following a traumatic event (Medina, 2011), and we can see that there are a variety of methods and practices that can help an individual do just that. The
research and anecdotes from women who used tattoos as part of their body reclamation following breast cancer reinforces the idea that tattoos can be a healthy form of reasserting control (R, 2017). In a similar vein, this trend also appears in literature regarding the positive effects of piercings and other body modifications, with respondents (primarily women) claiming that genital piercings helped reestablish a feeling of control and dominion over their bodies (Nelius, Armstrong, Rinard, Young, Hogan, & Angel, 2011; Young, Armstrong, Roberts, Mello, & Angel, 2010). Of note, some studies have found positive correlations between an individual’s history of abuse and their attainment of body art (Liu & Lester, 2012), though this study cannot speak to that relationship.

While we can’t connect this study to the research around body modification and trauma history, we can connect it to the experience of using pain as a form of catharsis and growth. Two participants in the interviews conducted for this study mentioned that the pain of receiving their tattoo was therapeutic and helped process the traumatic events that inspired their artwork, and that theme seems to exist in the literature around genital piercings as well. Additionally, this finding relates back to the breast cancer tattoos, both artistic and anatomical, in that a physical marker is being used to signal change and growth following a detrimental event.

Further investigation of the relationship between physical pain and coping yielded interesting findings related to self-harm behaviors and why individuals engage in them. Individuals suffering from borderline personality disorder (BPD) have been a focus of self-harm research for some time now, as their symptoms often lead to reoccurring self-harm practices (Elliott, Pages, Russo, & Wilson, 1996; Sansone, Songer, & Miller, 2005).
Self-harm is not a behavior that is inherently a sign of mental illness or instability; it is a practice that individuals may turn to when they feel that they have no other way to express their emotional turmoil, or when they need to feel anything at all amidst a period of numbness or dissociation (Crowe, 1996; Starr, 2004). It seems that, for many, trusting other people to help them cope is much easier said than done (especially if the individual has experienced any type of abuse; Gallop, 2002), meaning that a more self-guided form of coping that the individual can control may be more productive.

Beyond individuals experiencing BPD, research on self-harm behaviors in a broader population shows that self-harm behaviors can arise in anyone whose ability to self-soothe or manage emotional distress is impeded or ineffective (Gallop, 2002). I mentioned in the introduction that art therapy is a practice that has shown to be useful in cases like this, where novel and less explicit forms of self-expression may help preserve an individual’s defense mechanisms while simultaneously processing traumatic events, and I believe that the research presented here reinforces the idea that tattooing can fit into that ideology as well. Two interview participants claiming that pain helped them cope is not nearly enough data to generalize to any population, but the link between a need to feel anything in the wake of extreme emotional distress and self-harm has been clearly established in prior research. Nearly 80% of individuals who engage in self-injury behaviors identify as women (Gallop, 2002), and given the steadily rising numbers of women attaining tattoos, it will certainly be worth exploring the possible link between tattooing or body modification as a safer and healthier alternative to self-harm.
As a whole, the interview data served to reinforce what the survey data revealed. Tattooing to commemorate people and events is a common and socially acceptable practice that helps individuals process traumatic events in their narratives in a safe, self-guided manner. Successfully affirming a noticeable trend in society with empirical research is a major step towards giving the practice of tattooing as a form of coping more weight and validity, and the research here has done just that.

Naturally, tattooing is not for everybody. It is difficult to say if there are certain personality traits that determine if an individual is more or less likely to pursue tattooing in their own lives, as it is a highly subjective decision influenced by many sociocultural factors, but there is a clear precedent of individuals pursuing the practice and experiencing positive results. As a Jesuit educated individual, it is my responsibility to take what I learn and attempt to help others with that knowledge, and I believe this thesis has enabled me to do just that. At the very least, this thesis has reinforced what I have learned in my own experience of coping and moving forward.

During my sophomore year of college, I experienced a sustained and intense period of depersonalization. For roughly six months, I was trapped in a prolonged out-of-body experience that left me feeling emotionally numb. During that time, tattooing became one of the very few activities in my life that helped me feel human again. Even looking at the tattoos I already had helped remind me that, despite feeling like my body was not my own, I still had markers to indicate that this was my own body. The pain of receiving a tattoo during this phase was one of the strangest experiences of relief that I have ever experienced, and while it didn’t solve my problems completely, it gave me a
sign that I could still come back from the place I was in to a place of normality. I’ll never forget that feeling, and every time I see my chest tattoo, I remember what I was going through when I received it and how that period of darkness ended up being one of the most valuable periods of growth that I have ever experienced.

That knowledge has helped carry me through periods of self-doubt and worry, and I have seen what happens when others lose faith in their ability to cope and work through the difficult stages of their lives. I suppose part of my reasoning for pursuing this thesis topic is because I have lost several friends to suicide, and I’ve seen many other friends suffer from the losses of their own loved ones to suicide as well. My period of depersonalization and fear taught me that I had so much more strength within myself than I had previously thought, and I have been searching ever since then for ways to help others recognize that strength in themselves. A major tenet of the Jesuit mission is the idea of Men and Women With and For Others, but that doesn’t just mean reaching out to others when they make it known that they need outside help; it means helping people help themselves.

My pseudo-utopian goal is to help create a world where everyone can acknowledge and appreciate their own strength, a world where people don’t consider taking their own life as the only way out because they know for a fact that they are strong enough to fight through the darkness and come out the other side wiser and healthier. Whether tattooing is part of that process or not is arbitrary; I just want to help people express themselves and love themselves in such a way that they would never want to end their time on this earth.
For myself, tattooing has enabled me to accept and love parts of myself that I wanted to bury and forget. There would be no *cura personalis* for me without tattooing, and I can’t imagine where I would personally be in this life without it. Tattooing has been a medium of expression that has allowed me to define who I am and who I want to become, and I want to enable as many people as I possibly can to find their own method of self-expression that makes them feel whole. Whether it’s coping with the loss of a loved one, memorializing the best and most challenging times of their lives, or simply coming to accept and love the parts of themselves that they struggle with so mightily, I believe that self-expression can lead humanity to a more open, loving, and fulfilling future. Tattooing damn near saved my life, and I believe the lessons I’ve taken from it can save others’ lives too.
Works Cited


Appendix A
Recruitment Email and Consent Form

Dear Student,

You are being asked to participate in a survey regarding tattooing, distributed by Alex Arora for his Senior Honors Thesis. The purpose of this survey is to determine influences on people’s tattooing decisions. We are also interested in if and how individuals use tattooing in their own processing and coping with difficult times or events.

Information about the procedure and potential risks is below. Please click on the link at the end of the email if after reviewing this information, you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration!

Alex Arora

**Procedures:** The survey is completed online in a location of your choosing and should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. You will be asked a series of questions about your views and experiences with tattooing as well as general demographic questions. No questions will ask about negative life events, specifically. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. **You must be over the age of 18 and have at least one tattoo to participate in the study.** If you choose to participate, you may revoke your participation at any time without being penalized. Your responses will be kept confidential, and we will not collect any personally identifiable information such as name, address, etc.

At the end of this survey, there will be an opportunity for you to choose whether you would like to complete a follow up interview with the researcher. If you choose not to do the follow up interview, your participation in this study will be complete and you will be given a debriefing form with more information on the study. If you choose to complete a follow up interview with the researcher, you will be asked to provide your name and email address so that the researcher may contact you to determine a time and location for the follow up interview. Your name and email address will be kept confidential and coded in such a way that your answers to both the survey questions and the follow up interview questions will not be linked back to you.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts:** There are no anticipated risks to you from your participation in this study. We believe that the risk from participation is no greater than that encountered in everyday life. However, in case you do experience any mild distress from the experiment, a debriefing process will be provided at the end of the survey. All
data will be stored in a password protected electronic format and any published data will be in the aggregate.

If you have any questions, please contact Alex Arora (principal researcher) at aarora@regis.edu or Dr. Erin Winterrowd (faculty advisor) at ewinterrowd@regis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Regis University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Regis University, Center for Scholarship and Research Engagement, Denver, CO by or e-mail the IRB at IRB@regis.edu. The Office of Academic Grants no longer exists. By choosing to participate, you agree that you understand the procedures described above and that the purpose has been sufficiently explained to you. You understand that your responses are confidential and that you are at liberty to decline to participate in this study altogether.

If you are over the age of 18 and have at least one tattoo, and agree to participate in the survey, click the following link to continue.

[Insert link]

Thank you for your cooperation!

Alex Arora
Regis University Honors Program
aarora@regis.edu
Appendix B
Regis University
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH – INTERVIEW PORTION

Ink as Armor: An Examination Into the Relationship Between Tattooing and Coping with Negative Life Events

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Alexander Arora and Dr. Winterrowd, from the Department of Psychology & Neuroscience at Regis University. This project is being conducted as part of independent thesis research through the Regis University Honors Program and it has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate because you are over 18 years old and reported that you have one or more tattoos on your body. If you are under 18 or do not have a tattoo, we thank you for your time. Please let the researcher know.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is designed to collect information related to tattooing. We are curious mostly about your personal tattoo(s), specifically the inspiration and decision-making process for one of your own tattoos. We are also interested in the reasons for your tattoo(s) including whether or not you got a tattoo to help you cope with a negative life event.

PROCEDURES

At the end of the survey you took as part of this study, you agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview with the researcher and provided your name and email address. Your name and email address will be kept confidential and coded in such a way that your answers to both the survey questions and the follow up interview questions will not be linked back to you. The follow up interview will contain structured questions regarding individual tattoo decisions and motivations. At the end of the follow up interview, your participation in the study will be complete and you will be given a debriefing form and any questions you may have will be answered. All parts of the study are voluntary. You are welcome to not answer any question at any time.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no anticipated risks to you from your participation in this study. We believe that the risk from participation is no greater than that encountered in everyday life. However, in case you do experience any mild distress from the experiment, a debriefing process will be provided at the end of the interview.
POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You will benefit by learning about research in the fields of Psychology and Neuroscience, and will benefit by learning more about the topic of tattooing and coping mechanisms. There is a benefit to the field of psychology research by expanding our knowledge about this topic. Specifically, we hope to learn how this form of self-expression has been useful for individuals experiencing difficult periods in life.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants will take part in this study on a volunteer basis and they will not receive any compensation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. A coding procedure will be used so that the researcher will use a numerical code for your data that can’t be identified with you, and your name will not be recorded with the data. The researcher and the researcher’s faculty advisor will have access to the raw data, and results of data will be presented in aggregate form. After completion of the study, the consent forms and data will be stored for 3 years in a locked filing cabinet in the Regis College Department of Psychology & Neuroscience.

This research is being conducted by a student as part of a course requirement. Therefore, records that identify you and the consent form signed by you may be looked at by others. They are:

- Regis IRB that protects research subjects like you
- Officials at Regis University who are in charge of making sure that we follow the rules of research.
- Any faculty members who are co-investigators on this project may also contact you about your participation in the project.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You may choose to complete the follow-up interview or not. There is no penalty if you do not complete the follow-up interview or if you withdraw from the study completely. You will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Alex Arora (aarora@regis.edu, 720-435-5748) or Dr. Erin Winterrowd (ewinterrowd@regis.edu, 303-964-5295).

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Regis University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Regis University, Center for Scholarship and Research Engagement, Denver, CO by or e-mail the IRB at IRB@regis.edu. The Office of Academic Grants no longer exists. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with Regis. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

______________________________
Printed Name of Subject

______________________________
Signature of Subject               Date

______________________________
Signature of Investigator               Date

I understand that my answers in this interview will be recorded using an audio recorder and I agree to let the researcher do this.
Appendix C

The following questions ask about demographics and basic information regarding yourself.

1. What is your current age? (Drop Down)
2. What gender do you identify as?
   1. Female
   2. Male
   3. Transgender/Genderqueer
   4. Other: ________________
   5. Prefer not to disclose
3. What race do you identify as? Select all that apply.
   1. American Indian/Alaska Native
   2. Asian American
   3. Black/African American
   4. Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latinx
   5. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   6. White/European American
   7. Other
4. What ethnicity do you identify as (e.g., German, Navajo, Irish, Russian, Chinese)?
5. What religion do you identify as?
   1. Buddhist
   2. Catholic
   3. Other Christian denomination
   4. Hindu
   5. Jewish
   6. Muslim
   7. Other non-Christian faith
   8. Atheist
   9. Unaffiliated or agnostic
   10. Prefer not to disclose
6. Do you consider yourself a religious person?
   1. If yes, do you consider yourself an active religious person (e.g., Attending religious services, observing religious holidays and customs, etc.)
7. Do you have a tattoo?
   1. If yes, how many?
8. Do you know someone close to you that has a tattoo? If yes, who?
9. How would you describe the types of messages you received from your family regarding tattooing?
   1. Very Negative
   2. Somewhat Negative
   3. Neutral
   4. Somewhat Positive
   5. Very Positive
   6. Messages were Ambivalent/Unclear

10. How would you describe the types of messages you received regarding tattooing from your friends and peers?
    1. Very Negative
    2. Somewhat Negative
    3. Neutral
    4. Somewhat Positive
    5. Very Positive
    6. Messages were Ambivalent/Unclear

[If no to #7 and yes to #8] Thank you for your participation in this survey. Because you do not have any tattoos personally, the rest of the questions do not apply to you. However, since you know someone who does have a tattoo(s), would you be willing to send them a link to this survey?

For questions #11-15, select one of your tattoos that has the greatest personal significance to you and that you are willing to discuss. Please keep that tattoo in mind for the following questions.

11. Where on your body did you place your tattoo? (Fill in the blank and code)
12. Do you have a significant reason for getting your tattoo? If so, select all that apply:
   1. Just for fun
   2. Commemorating a person, place, or event
   3. Religious/spiritual reasons
   4. Covering a scar or injury
   5. Rite of passage (just turned 18, military tattoo, etc.)
   6. Other (fill in the blank)
   7. Prefer not to disclose

13. Which of these explanations would you consider to be the primary or most important reason?
   a. Just for fun
   b. Commemorating a person, place, or event
c. Religious/spiritual reasons

d. Covering a scar or injury

e. Rite of passage (just turned 18, military tattoo, etc.)
f. Other (fill in the blank)
g. Prefer not to disclose

14. Some people get tattoos to help cope with a significant negative event or time in one’s life: Do you know anyone who has gotten a tattoo for that reason? If yes, whom?

15. Do you have one or more tattoos for that reason? If yes, how many?

16. Do you believe that a tattoo would be an effective form of coping for you or someone that you are close with? Explain.

17. Would you be willing to answer a few further questions in a one-on-one interview setting with the researcher regarding tattooing as a method of coping? The interview should take 15-20 minutes.

1. If yes, please provide an email address for the researcher to contact you and set up a time and location for the follow-up interview. All contact information will be kept confidential. Once you meet with the researcher, he will assign you a random participant code that will be connected to both your survey results and your interview responses. Your email address and name will not be linked in any way with your answers to these survey questions or the follow-up interview questions.

2. If you are not interested in answering a few further questions, you are done. We thank you for your participation in this survey!
Appendix D

Interview Questions

Pick a tattoo that you believe has helped you cope with a negative event.

Describe your tattoo to me. What is it, what inspired it? (Code certain art styles or imagery and code source of inspiration or origin of idea: inspired by a person, event, a death, a significant change, etc.)

How did you decide on that design?

What influenced your design choices, body placement? Give them examples, why that arm? Etc.

What role did the tattoo play in your overall coping? How has it helped?

To what extent do you feel that tattooing reflects your identity(ies)?

Why is that tattoo special to you? (Code the meaning: represents important part of the self, of their journey, an important influence, etc.)

What else about your tattoo would be important to share?

Please think of a name you would like me to use when referring to your answer. It can be any name so long as it isn’t your own.
Appendix E

DEBRIEFING FORM - SURVEY

Ink as Armor: An Examination into the Relationship Between Tattooing and the Ability to Cope With Negative Life Events

Alexander R. Arora

aarora@regis.edu, 720-435-5748

**Background:** This study was designed to better understand the factors that influence tattooing including beliefs, family and peer messages, and life events. Tattooing has grown in terms of popularity and general societal acceptance in recent decades, shifting away from the association with deviance that initially followed tattoos. Additionally, individuals often design and receive tattoos as a form of remembrance, leading us to investigate in greater detail the relationship between tattooing and an individual’s ability to process difficult times or events in their lives.

**Method:** You completed a survey with questions designed to study your personal views on tattooing in relation to how tattoos were discussed and seen among your family and peer groups. These questions were also designed to understand how your views might have been influenced by society and cultural influences. Finally, we asked a couple of questions related to how tattooing may have factored into your processing, memorializing, or coping with a negative event in your life. Participants who agreed to do a follow up interview with the researcher will be contacted separately to set up a meeting.
**Hypotheses:** I hypothesized that tattooing can be a beneficial method of coping and processing difficult or negative life events for individuals who have been previously drawn to the idea of tattooing or body modification. I hypothesized that it would not be as effective for individuals raised in an environment where tattoos are stigmatized and viewed negatively.

Please visit [http://www.thrivectr.org/mental-health-resources/](http://www.thrivectr.org/mental-health-resources/) for information on mental health resources in and around the Denver area, should you need them. Your participation in this study, as well as your answers to the questions posed by the researchers, will be kept entirely confidential.

Thank you for your participation in this study!
Appendix F

DEBRIEFING FORM - INTERVIEW

Ink as Armor: An Examination into the Relationship Between Tattooing and the Ability to Cope With Negative Life Events

Alexander R. Arora

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Background: This study was designed to better understand the factors that influence tattooing including beliefs, family and peer messages, and life events. Tattooing has grown in terms of popularity and general societal acceptance in recent decades, shifting away from the association with deviance that initially followed tattoos. Additionally, individuals often design and receive tattoos as a form of remembrance, leading us to investigate in greater detail the relationship between tattooing and an individual’s ability to process difficult times or events in their lives.

Method: You completed an interview with the researcher in which you answered a series of predetermined questions focused on your personal tattoos and the inspiration behind them. These included questions such as what inspired your tattoos, what led you to the designs and placement you chose, and how you feel the tattoo reflects your identity(ies). Answers were digitally recorded and will be transcribed by the researcher. Your responses to the interview will be linked back to your survey responses using a random number assigned to you.
Hypotheses: I hypothesized that tattooing can be a beneficial method of coping and processing difficult or negative life events for individuals who have been previously drawn to the idea of tattooing or body modification. I hypothesized that it would not be as effective for individuals raised in an environment where tattoos are stigmatized and viewed negatively.

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Thank you for your participation in this study!