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## From Stigma to Self-Expression: Uncovering the Motivations and Symbolic Meanings of Tattoos in Modern Society

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This qualitative research explored the personal meanings, motivations, and social experiences of tattooed individuals in contemporary Philippine society. The study aimed to understand why people get tattoos, what their designs mean to them, how culture and media influence their choices, and how they experience acceptance or stigma in their communities. It also examined how tattoos help shape their personal identity.

**Methodology:** The study used Key Informant Interviews (KII) with 20 purposively selected participants from different locations, ages, occupations, genders, and religious backgrounds. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes from the interview responses, focusing on lived experiences and personal stories.

**Results:** Findings showed that many participants got tattoos to cope with life events such as trauma, grief, recovery, or relationship milestones. Others were motivated by faith, family, or personal growth. Tattoo designs carried deep meanings—such as strength, transformation, peace, remembrance, and cultural pride. Media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, along with Filipino heritage (e.g., Baybayin script), also influenced tattoo design choices. While some participants experienced support and acceptance, others faced judgment or stigma, particularly in religious or professional settings.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that tattoos are more than just body art. They serve as personal expressions of identity, memory, and resilience. Tattoos help individuals tell their stories, reclaim their bodies, and express values that matter to them.

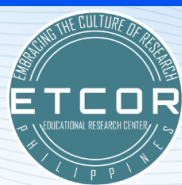
**Recommendations:** The research recommends promoting inclusive policies in workplaces, creating safe spaces for self-expression, and encouraging respect for cultural tattoo practices in both personal and professional settings.

**Keywords:** *Tattooing, Identity Construction, Symbolic Meaning, Social Stigma, Qualitative Research*

### INTRODUCTION

Tattoos, once primarily associated with deviance, criminality, and subcultural identities, have undergone a profound transformation in contemporary society. What was once stigmatized is now increasingly normalized, artistic, and even therapeutic (Rivera, 2024). In today's globalized world, tattoos serve not only as decorative art but as complex symbols of personal narrative, cultural identity, resistance, spirituality, and healing. This shift has sparked a growing interest in understanding why individuals from diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds choose to permanently mark their bodies with ink. The reconfiguration of societal attitudes—especially in traditionally conservative societies like the Philippines—reveals how body art is now framed as a form of self-expression rather than rebellion (Villafranca & Santos, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, tattoos carry layered meanings that intertwine indigenous heritage, colonial history, and modern reinterpretations. Historically, tattooing was a respected tradition among indigenous Filipino groups like the Kalinga, where batok was used to signify bravery, status, and rite of passage (Salvador-Amores, 2021). However, colonial and post-colonial perceptions branded these practices as primitive and



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uncivilized, contributing to centuries-long stigma. Contemporary Filipinos are now reclaiming tattooing as a medium of cultural renaissance and identity assertion (Ramirez et al., 2023). The revival of indigenous practices, such as in Buscalan village where traditional tattooist Whang-Od still practices batok, reflects a broader trend in which body modification is seen as heritage preservation (Soukup et al., 2021).

Globally, the motivations for getting tattoos are multifaceted—ranging from aesthetic appreciation and emotional catharsis to commemorating milestones and asserting agency over the body. In a qualitative study by Handoko and Green (2020), Indonesian men reported spiritual dreams, personal traumas, and rites of masculinity as central motivations for tattooing. Similar trends appear in Western contexts, where tattoos function as "narratives of the skin," providing an alternative archive of a person's experiences, traumas, and transformations (MacFarlane, 2021). As the meanings of tattoos have become increasingly personalized and less dictated by rigid subcultural codes, the line between deviance and self-affirmation continues to blur.

Moreover, tattoos have become important tools for constructing individual and collective identities in the digital age. The visibility of tattoos on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok has both aestheticized and commercialized tattoo culture, turning it into a public and performative act. This global phenomenon is not without criticism; scholars caution against the commodification and exoticization of traditional tattoo practices, particularly by outsiders seeking "authentic" experiences (Salvador-Amores, 2021; Soukup et al., 2021). Nonetheless, this tension highlights the dual role of tattoos as both personal expression and social commentary—revealing how inked skin becomes a living canvas of cultural negotiation.

As the body increasingly becomes a site of meaning-making, this study seeks to explore the motivations and symbolic meanings behind contemporary tattooing, with particular attention to Filipino and Southeast Asian contexts within a broader global framework. Through an analysis of recent academic literature and qualitative narratives, this research aims to demystify the act of tattooing—not as rebellion, but as a powerful language of identity, memory, and meaning.

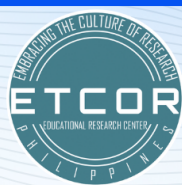
### Background of the Study

Tattoos have long occupied a paradoxical place in human culture—once seen as sacred rites of passage or spiritual protection, they were later recast as symbols of deviance and social marginalization. In recent decades, however, global perspectives on tattooing have shifted dramatically, with tattoos now regarded as valid expressions of identity, memory, and even professional artistry. This transformation is observable across continents, from the expressive subcultures of Europe and the U.S. to revivals of indigenous tattooing in Southeast Asia. In particular, the Philippines offers a rich cultural backdrop, where traditional tattooing practices (such as batek or batok) co-exist with urban, modern tattoo scenes that reflect hybridized and globalized values (Violago, 2022).

Across Asian societies, tattoos have begun to serve as deeply personalized statements of belief, trauma, heritage, and empowerment. In Indonesia and Thailand, research has shown how tattooing becomes a medium for articulating masculinity, resilience, and faith (Handoko & Green, 2020). In the Philippines, scholars have documented the resurgence of tattooing as a cultural reclaiming process tied to ancestral pride and ethnic heritage, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Kalinga (Soukup et al., 2021). However, tattooing in urban Filipino contexts is also increasingly shaped by youth subcultures, global aesthetics, and digital performance (Biwang, 2023), offering a rich site of sociocultural inquiry.

In Western countries, motivations behind tattoos have evolved from group identification to personal storytelling. MacFarlane (2021) argues that tattoos act as "narratives of the skin," where individuals map emotional events and self-conceptions into visual symbols. In the U.S., tattoos have become associated with therapeutic identity reconstruction, particularly among trauma survivors and LGBTQ+ individuals (Coker, 2025). Despite this, the interplay between these motivations and cultural, spiritual, or historical factors remains understudied in non-Western contexts. Southeast Asia in particular lacks a unifying body of scholarly work that bridges indigenous practices with urban and postcolonial tattoo phenomena.

While studies such as those by Ramirez et al. (2023) and Salvador-Amores (2021) explore the ethnographic significance of tattoos in the Cordillera region, there is a significant research gap in contemporary urban Filipino perspectives—specifically how tattooing functions as identity formation among millennials and Gen Z populations. Most available studies focus on the preservation of tradition or gender-specific interpretations, but little work addresses the broader range of personal, aesthetic, symbolic, and existential motivations emerging in today's digital, interconnected society. This neglect is particularly striking given the rapid normalization of tattoos across Philippine society, even among students, professionals, and religious practitioners (Rivera, 2024).



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Furthermore, although some works highlight motivations related to rebellion, spirituality, or emotional healing, few studies attempt to classify or interpret how individuals across class, gender, or geographic boundaries in the Philippines articulate meaning through their tattoos. There remains a lack of holistic, interdisciplinary research that combines anthropological, psychological, and cultural frameworks to study tattoos as evolving semiotic and embodied expressions. This study addresses this research gap by examining the motivations and symbolic meanings of tattoos among modern Filipinos and drawing comparative insights from broader Asian and Western contexts.

### Significance of the Research

This research holds considerable academic, cultural, and societal significance, especially in the context of an evolving Filipino identity in a globalized and increasingly expressive world. As tattoos continue to shift from their marginal and stigmatized past toward normalized and even celebrated forms of identity expression, understanding their symbolic and motivational dimensions becomes critical. In the Philippine setting—where colonial legacies, indigenous resurgence, and global popular culture intersect—the meaning of tattoos is layered, dynamic, and underexplored. This study seeks to contribute to this growing field of inquiry by offering a grounded, interdisciplinary understanding of how tattoos serve as vehicles of self-expression, cultural memory, and psychosocial identity among contemporary individuals.

The findings of this research will benefit various academic fields including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. By analyzing the nuanced motivations and symbolic representations embedded in tattoo practices, the study adds depth to current conversations around body politics, cultural resistance, and identity performance. Furthermore, it provides scholars and educators with updated empirical data relevant to Southeast Asian and Filipino experiences—contexts that remain underrepresented in the global tattoo scholarship. This addresses the research gap observed in previous literature, which has often centered Western populations and neglected the indigenous and postcolonial narratives emerging from the Global South (Ramirez et al., 2023; Biwang, 2023).

On a sociocultural level, this study can inform efforts to combat persisting stigma and social prejudice against tattooed individuals in formal institutions such as schools, workplaces, and religious communities. While tattoos have become trendy in popular media, conservative Filipino communities often still associate them with rebellion or delinquency. By highlighting how tattoos can symbolize healing, heritage, spiritual growth, or artistry, this research contributes to breaking stereotypes and promoting inclusivity and cultural literacy (Rivera, 2024; Salvador-Amores, 2021).

This research is also valuable to the tattoo industry and creative professionals, offering them insights into the psychological and cultural significance behind client choices. Understanding these motivations can guide ethical and culturally sensitive design practices, especially when working with motifs rooted in indigenous traditions. Moreover, it can inspire dialogue between tattoo artists and scholars, potentially leading to collaborative community-centered projects, exhibitions, or education campaigns that celebrate tattooing as both art and identity.

Lastly, the study can empower individuals—particularly youth and marginalized groups—who use tattoos as a medium for self-expression and healing. Their voices, often sidelined in academic discourse, are brought to the forefront in this research. In doing so, the study affirms tattooing as a legitimate and meaningful form of personal storytelling, transformation, and agency. By exploring the intersection of ink, identity, and intention, this work aspires not only to inform but also to humanize and dignify the tattooed body.

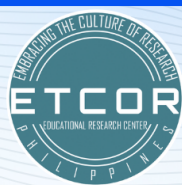
### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on several interrelated theories that offer a lens to interpret the motivations, meanings, and societal responses to tattooing as a practice. These theories are drawn from symbolic interactionism, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Goffman's theory of stigma.

#### 1. Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)

This theory posits that people act based on the meanings things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Tattoos, in this context, are not just body art but carry deep meanings constructed by the individual and society. They serve as "symbols" that reflect one's identity, experiences, or values. The interactionist approach explains how individuals attach meaning to their tattoos and how they negotiate these meanings in their social environments.





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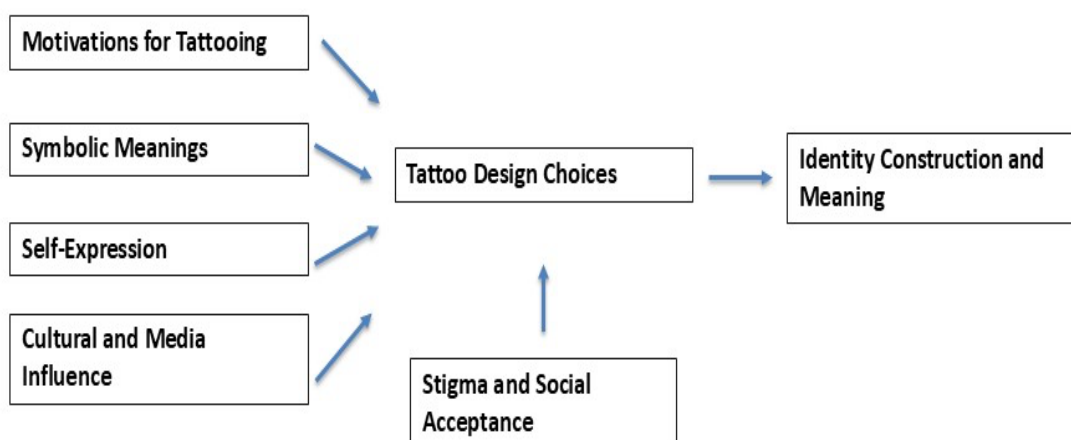
### 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, updated 1970)

Tattoos may be expressions of various levels of human needs—ranging from belongingness and self-esteem to self-actualization. For example, people may get tattoos to fit into a group (social need), to affirm their uniqueness or resilience (esteem need), or to embody their inner purpose (self-actualization). Maslow's framework helps categorize motivations beyond aesthetics or trends.

### 3. Goffman's Theory of Stigma (1963)

Goffman describes stigma as a discrediting attribute that reduces an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." This is particularly relevant to tattooed individuals in conservative societies like the Philippines, where body modification may still be met with judgment or exclusion. Goffman's theory helps explore how respondents manage, conceal, or resist stigma related to their tattoos.

## Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1. Identity Construction and Meaning of Tattoos**

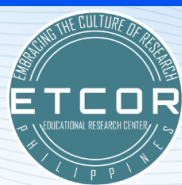
This conceptual framework is grounded in the interpretivist and constructivist traditions of qualitative research, which prioritize participants' lived experiences, social contexts, and symbolic interpretations. The framework guides the inquiry into how tattooed individuals construct meaning, navigate stigma, and use tattoos to express personal and social identities in contemporary Philippine society.

In a qualitative study, a conceptual framework is not a predictive model, but rather a guide to inquiry. It helps clarify what to explore, how to frame participants' narratives, and which dimensions of meaning are most relevant to understanding the phenomenon of interest—in this case, tattooing. This framework helps structure the collection and interpretation of narrative data by mapping the relationships among psychological, cultural, symbolic, and social dimensions of tattoo practices.

## Core Constructs and Their Qualitative Relevance

### 1. Motivations for Tattooing (Individual Lived Experiences)

This construct captures participants' personal, emotional, and transformative reasons for getting tattoos. In qualitative terms, this represents narrative triggers—stories of survival, healing, trauma, love, spirituality, or change. Participants' accounts of why they chose to be tattooed offer rich phenomenological data that reflect their subjective realities and how tattoos are embedded in those experiences.



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## 2. Symbolic Meanings (Interpretation of Symbols)

Participants do not only wear tattoos—they assign meaning to them. This theme focuses on how individuals interpret the symbols they choose. Through qualitative interviews, we can understand how a butterfly might represent healing, or how a Baybayin script reconnects one to ancestral identity. This aligns with Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which emphasizes that meaning arises through social interaction and personal interpretation.

## 3. Self-Expression (Narrative Identity Construction)

In qualitative terms, self-expression is viewed as a form of identity narration. Tattoos become part of how individuals “write” or “speak” their identities on their bodies. Whether to affirm their gender identity, mental health journey, or personal beliefs, participants use tattoos to communicate a version of self that may not always be verbalized. These visual narratives are central to interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

## 4. Cultural and Media Influence (Contextual Influence)

From a qualitative lens, this construct reflects the cultural and social conditioning of meaning-making. Interviews can uncover how participants' tattoo choices were influenced by digital culture (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), cultural revival movements (e.g., Baybayin), or global trends. These cultural inputs frame how participants imagine, contextualize, and justify their body art.

## Tattoo Design Choices as a Mediating Construct

In qualitative analysis, tattoo designs are seen not only as aesthetic outputs but as embodied choices shaped by motivations, meanings, and influences. They serve as the mediating layer through which the individual translates internal experience into visible form. Tattoo choices offer key textual data—names, animals, verses, dates—that become interpretive anchors in narrative interviews.

## Stigma and Social Acceptance as a Contextual Filter

Unlike in quantitative frameworks where a moderating variable is a statistical tool, in qualitative inquiry, stigma and acceptance are understood as social forces and lived tensions. This element filters how tattooed individuals experience their bodies in institutional, familial, and spiritual spaces. Some may internalize shame, while others resist and reclaim meaning. Goffman's (1963) concept of “spoiled identity” guides the interpretation of these conflicting social perceptions.

## Identity Construction and Meaning as Emergent Outcome

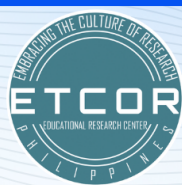
At the center of this inquiry is the emergent construction of identity and meaning. Rather than assuming a fixed outcome, qualitative research explores how tattoos help participants understand, perform, and reimagine their identities—particularly in transitional life phases (e.g., post-trauma, coming-of-age, loss). Through in-depth interviews, the research captures the emotional and symbolic layers of self-making that tattoos enable.

In sum, this conceptual framework does not seek to predict behavior but to illuminate the pathways through which individuals ascribe meaning to their tattoos. It guides the collection and thematic analysis of rich narrative data, aligned with interpretive frameworks of Symbolic Interactionism (meaning-making through social symbols), Maslow's Hierarchy (tattoos as fulfillment of psychological needs), and Goffman's Stigma Theory (management of visible identity markers). This framework helps understand tattooing as a lived, symbolic, and socially embedded act, offering a map through which participants' stories can be thematically interpreted and critically analyzed.

## Definition of Key Terms

### 1. Tattoo

A tattoo is a form of body modification in which ink or pigment is inserted into the dermal layer of the skin to create a permanent design, pattern, or symbol. Tattoos have served various functions throughout history including spiritual protection, status symbol, identity marker, or aesthetic expression (MacFarlane, 2021). In this study, a tattoo refers specifically to any permanent body marking obtained by individuals aged 18 and above within the last 10 years, regardless of size, placement, or design. Only tattoos intentionally acquired for personal, cultural, emotional, or aesthetic reasons (not forced or medical tattoos) are considered.



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## 2. Motivation

Motivation refers to the internal or external reasons that drive individuals to engage in a particular behavior. It may be influenced by personal values, emotions, societal norms, or psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, motivation refers to the self-reported reasons why participants chose to get tattooed. These reasons are identified through qualitative responses and categorized into themes such as emotional expression, identity affirmation, cultural heritage, aesthetics, social influence, or healing.

## 3. Symbolic Meaning

Symbolic meaning refers to the representation or significance that individuals attribute to a visual or verbal symbol. In cultural studies, it denotes how objects or actions convey deeper narratives, emotions, or social identity (Geertz, 1973). In this study, symbolic meaning is the personal interpretation and emotional or cultural significance participants attach to their tattoos. This includes associations with life events, beliefs, people, or traditions, as reported in interviews or surveys.

## 4. Stigma

Stigma is a social process by which certain attributes, identities, or behaviors are devalued, marginalized, or associated with negative stereotypes. It often leads to social exclusion or discrimination (Goffman, 1963). In this research, stigma refers to any negative societal reaction, label, or treatment experienced by participants due to their tattoos—especially from family, employers, schools, or religious communities—as reported through self-disclosure.

## 5. Self-Expression

Self-expression is the ability to communicate one's emotions, beliefs, personality, and identity through behavior, appearance, or creative practices. It is linked to psychological well-being and individuality (Maslow, 1954; Kim & Ko, 2021). For this study, self-expression refers to the way individuals use tattoos to project or explore their identity, personality, beliefs, values, or emotional states. It is determined by participant narratives on the personal meaning behind their tattoos.

## 6. Modern Society

Modern society is characterized by rapid urbanization, digital technology, globalization, and shifting cultural values. It typically values individualism, self-expression, and diversity (Bauman, 2000). In this research, modern society refers to the current social context from 2015 onwards in urban and semi-urban Filipino settings, where cultural hybridization, social media, and changing norms toward body modification are prevalent.

## Literature Review

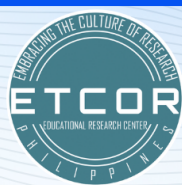
### 1. Motivations for Tattooing in Modern Society

Motivations for acquiring tattoos have shifted significantly in the past decade. While traditional motivations included rites of passage, tribal belonging, and social status, contemporary motivations are far more individualized and diverse. Coker (2025) highlights that women today often choose tattoos for empowerment, personal healing, and to mark significant life transitions. Similarly, research in the Philippines and Southeast Asia shows motivations ranging from artistic expression and self-affirmation to reclaiming cultural heritage and spirituality (Ramirez et al., 2023). Importantly, Handoko and Green (2020) find that in Indonesia, spiritual beliefs, emotional catharsis, and even dreams are central motivators—demonstrating the complexity of the phenomenon in the Asian region.

### 2. Symbolic Meanings and Identity Construction

Tattoos are powerful tools for constructing and communicating identity. In many societies, the meanings of tattoos are co-created through personal reflection, peer influence, and cultural heritage. MacFarlane (2021) suggests that tattoos serve as "narratives of the skin," encoding experiences, aspirations, or even trauma. In the Philippine context, Salvador-Amores (2021) and Ramirez et al. (2023) note that indigenous tattoos are seen as a form of ethnic pride, a way to resist colonial erasure, and a symbol of continuity with ancestral pasts. Meanwhile, among urban youth, tattoos increasingly reflect hybrid identities—mixing local, global, and digital symbols to negotiate belonging in a rapidly changing society (Biwang, 2023).





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### 3. Tattoos as Self-Expression

The theme of self-expression is now central to tattoo culture worldwide. Recent research shows that tattoos allow individuals to externalize inner values, process emotions, and establish autonomy over their bodies (Coker, 2025; Rivera, 2024). For Filipino millennials and Gen Z, tattoos have become a statement of uniqueness, artistry, and sometimes activism (Rivera, 2024). Even as tattooing gains mainstream acceptance, the act of getting tattooed remains a personal journey, deeply tied to self-actualization and meaning-making (Ramirez et al., 2023).

### 4. Stigma, Social Perception, and Acceptance

Despite increasing acceptance, tattoos still carry stigma in many societies. Coker (2025) notes that women with visible tattoos report greater social judgment and discrimination—often from older generations or conservative institutions. In the Philippines, Rivera (2024) documents lingering stereotypes linking tattoos with deviance, especially in professional or religious settings. However, changing norms among urban youth and increasing media visibility are gradually reducing stigma and encouraging broader acceptance (Soukup et al., 2021). The literature emphasizes the importance of context, noting that experiences of stigma or acceptance vary widely by gender, class, and social environment.

### 5. The Influence of Media, Pop Culture, and Indigenous Traditions

The proliferation of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok has played a transformative role in shaping tattoo culture. Tattoos are now shared, commercialized, and discussed in public digital spaces, blurring the line between personal expression and social performance (Ramirez et al., 2023). At the same time, a revival of indigenous tattooing traditions—such as the Kalinga's batok—has inspired a renewed sense of ethnic identity among Filipinos and other Southeast Asian populations (Soukup et al., 2021; Salvador-Amores, 2021). Scholars caution, however, against cultural commodification and emphasize the need to respect the origins and sacred meanings of traditional designs.

### 6. Gaps and Future Directions

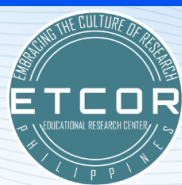
Most existing literature remains focused on either traditional/indigenous tattooing or Western urban practices. There is a research gap regarding the experiences and motivations of urban, non-indigenous Filipino youth, especially as they navigate both local and global influences (Biwang, 2023). In addition, cross-cultural comparative studies are limited, particularly those that bridge Southeast Asian and Western experiences or explore intersections of gender, class, and digital culture.

### 7. Popular Tattoo Designs and Their Meanings (Global and Philippine Context)

Tattoo design choices often reflect deeply personal meanings, social affiliations, or cultural aspirations. In both global and Philippine settings, tattoo motifs are more than just visual elements—they carry emotional, symbolic, and sometimes spiritual weight.

Studies show that the most popular tattoo designs often fall into categories of animals, celestial bodies, symbols, flora, and script/text, each associated with specific personal or cultural meanings (Ramirez et al., 2023; Coker, 2025). For example:

- a) Tiger tattoos, globally popular, are often worn by individuals seeking to express strength, courage, or a fighting spirit. In the Philippine context, tiger imagery can also reference resilience in adversity and is often seen among male clients in urban centers (Biwang, 2023).
- b) Owl tattoos symbolize wisdom, intuition, and guidance. Common among women and older millennials, owl tattoos are typically placed on the shoulder or forearm and represent navigating life's transitions with insight.
- c) Butterfly tattoos, especially in Southeast Asia, are widely popular among women. They represent transformation, beauty, and rebirth—symbolizing one's journey through hardship or personal evolution.



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- d) Stars with dates or names are commemorative tattoos often chosen to honor lost loved ones or important life events such as birth or recovery. These tattoos are personalized and typically placed on the chest, back, or wrist.
- e) Arrows and infinity signs, or combined arrow-infinity tattoos, symbolize direction, life journey, and continuity. These are particularly trendy among Gen Z and are interpreted as affirmations of life goals and endless possibilities.
- f) Text-based tattoos (e.g., quotes, Bible verses, personal mantras) remain among the most enduring designs. Popular phrases in the Philippines include "Laban," "Bahala na," or religious passages, indicating grit, faith, or surrender to fate.

#### 8. Who Are the Tattooed? Demographics and Psychographics

Tattoo wearers span a wide demographic spectrum, but patterns emerge based on age, gender, occupation, and sociocultural background. Studies in the Philippines show that tattoos are most prevalent among individuals aged 18–35, with rising visibility among students, artists, BPO workers, and digital freelancers (Rivera, 2024). Globally, tattoo adoption is now balanced across genders, but meanings and placements often vary.

Women often choose tattoos as expressions of empowerment, emotional recovery, or artistic identity (Coker, 2025). Men tend to associate tattoos with strength, resistance, or camaraderie—especially among military, athletic, or brotherhood communities. LGBTQ+ individuals frequently use tattoos to reclaim their bodies and express queerness, pride, or transformation (MacFarlane, 2021). Indigenous groups, such as the Kalinga in the Philippines, maintain tattoos as sacred symbols of heritage, bravery, and social status (Salvador-Amores, 2021). In the digital age, content creators and influencers often get tattoos as aesthetic statements or brand identity elements—adding a layer of "performative symbolism" through social media (Ramirez et al., 2023).

#### 9. Top 30 Tattoo Designs & Common Meanings (Philippines & Global Trends)

Tattoo designs are not only aesthetic choices but also rich symbolic expressions that reveal the values, emotions, and lived experiences of individuals. In both the Philippine setting and across the globe, certain tattoo designs have gained popularity for their universal appeal, personal significance, and cultural resonance. These recurring motifs often encapsulate themes such as strength, transformation, spirituality, love, and identity. The designs chosen by individuals are frequently shaped by cultural traditions, social influences, media exposure, and personal journeys. As tattoo culture becomes more mainstream, especially among Filipino youth and urban creatives, a clearer understanding of the top tattoo designs and their meanings helps contextualize the motivations behind body art and its role in self-expression and social symbolism. The following section presents a curated list of the top 30 tattoo designs and their associated meanings, reflecting both Philippine preferences and global trends.

Tattoo Design	Common Meaning / Symbolism
1. Tiger	Power, courage, protection, dominance
2. Owl	Wisdom, intuition, spiritual insight
3. Butterfly	Transformation, rebirth, beauty, freedom (popular among women)
4. Star with Dates	Milestones, remembrance of loved ones, celebration of life moments
5. Arrow	Moving forward, direction, personal journey
6. Infinity Symbol	Eternal love, limitless possibilities, unbreakable bonds
7. Phoenix	Rising from the ashes, overcoming adversity, rebirth
8. Lion	Leadership, bravery, royalty, strength
9. Wolf	Loyalty, family ties, survival, instinct





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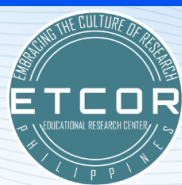


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Tattoo Design	Common Meaning / Symbolism
10. Cross / Rosary	Faith, divine guidance, Christian beliefs (very common in the Philippines)
11. Anchor	Stability, hope, grounding, staying strong in adversity
12. Compass	Life's direction, finding one's path, exploration
13. Mandala	Spiritual growth, harmony, inner balance
14. Lotus Flower	Enlightenment, peace, spiritual awakening (esp. in Buddhist/Hindu traditions)
15. Crescent Moon	Femininity, cycles of life, change
16. Skull	Mortality, strength in facing death, rebellion
17. Snake	Transformation, danger, wisdom, sexuality
18. Sun & Moon Combo	Balance, duality (masculine & feminine), wholeness
19. Tree of Life	Connection to ancestry, personal growth, rooted identity
20. Feather	Freedom, ascension, truth, spiritual travel
21. Crown	Royalty, personal power, self-worth
22. Sword / Dagger	Protection, courage, justice, strength
23. Geometric Designs	Order, logic, modern spiritual symbolism
24. Minimalist Line Art	Simplicity, elegance, subtle meaning (popular among Gen Z)
25. Baybayin Script	Filipino identity, cultural revival, heritage pride
26. Zodiac Signs	Astrology, personality expression, fate
27. Clock / Hourglass	Passage of time, mortality, making moments count
28. Wings	Freedom, ascension, overcoming hardships
29. Bible Verse Quotes	Faith, life guidance, personal reflection. Examples are: Jeremiah 29:11 – "For I know the plans I have for you..." (hope and purpose) "Philippians 4:13" – "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (empowerment, strength) "Psalm 23:4" – "Even though I walk through the valley..." (faith during trials) "Proverbs 3:5-6" – "Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." (trust and surrender) "Isaiah 41:10" – "Fear not, for I am with you..." (divine comfort)
30. Inspirational Text / Quotes	Affirmation, self-love, resilience. Examples are: "Laban" (Filipino) – "Fight on" or "Keep going" "Bahala na" – Acceptance of fate or divine will "This too shall pass" – Endurance and impermanence of pain "Stay strong" – Resilience through adversity "Live the life you love" – Freedom and authenticity "Be still" – Inner peace and calm (often spiritual or meditative) "Only God can judge me" – Autonomy and faith in divine justice "I am enough" – Self-worth and acceptance

### 10. Design Trends by Region

Tattoo design preferences vary significantly across regions, reflecting unique cultural values and historical influences. In the Philippines, commonly chosen designs include Christian-inspired crosses, Baybayin script representing indigenous heritage, butterflies symbolizing personal transformation, religious verses for spiritual grounding, and commemorative tattoos featuring family-related dates. Across Asia, popular motifs include lotus flowers representing spiritual awakening, dragons symbolizing strength and mysticism, minimalist line work that appeals to younger generations, and geometric mandalas reflecting harmony and balance. In global or Western



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contexts, design trends favor phoenixes for rebirth, lions for courage and leadership, infinity-arrow combinations symbolizing limitless direction, emotionally resonant script tattoos, and astrological symbols that reflect identity and fate. These trends demonstrate how tattooing operates as both a personal and cultural canvas, shaped by context and evolving expression.

## Synthesis

The body of literature reviewed illustrates the dynamic evolution of tattooing from a stigmatized practice to a socially complex and personally meaningful form of expression. Scholars such as Ramirez et al. (2023) and Salvador-Amores (2021) emphasize the cultural and historical roots of tattooing in the Philippines, particularly among indigenous groups like the Kalinga. These works focus on batok as an act of cultural reclamation and ancestral pride. In contrast, contemporary studies such as Rivera (2024) and Coker (2025) highlight tattoos as deeply personal choices tied to emotional healing, identity formation, and aesthetics among modern youth and women in urban areas. The shift from traditional tribal meanings to modern individualized expression is a key theme across these works.

While both Western and Asian scholars recognize tattoos as tools of identity negotiation, the motivations and meanings diverge across contexts. MacFarlane (2021) and Handoko & Green (2020) explore tattoos as narrative and spiritual tools in the West and Southeast Asia, respectively, but their research focuses primarily on male and subcultural experiences. Coker (2025), meanwhile, foregrounds the gendered experiences of tattooed women, showing how tattoos can become acts of empowerment or social resistance. Compared to Salvador-Amores's ethnographic lens on indigenous rituals, Coker's work takes a more psychological and feminist approach. These variations highlight that while tattoos serve universal functions of expression, their cultural frames, interpretations, and societal consequences differ widely.

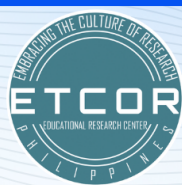
Moreover, several authors (Soukup et al., 2021; Biwang, 2023) caution against the commodification of indigenous tattooing through tourism and digital platforms. These studies show how the revival of traditional designs in the Philippines—such as those performed by Whang-Od—has both celebrated and commercialized heritage. Meanwhile, authors like Rivera (2024) and Ramirez et al. (2023) demonstrate how contemporary tattoo trends—including minimalist symbols, Baybayin script, and biblical quotes—signal not rebellion, but resilience, belonging, and digital-era identity making.

Despite these valuable insights, a notable research gap persists. Most existing literature either focuses on tribal or indigenous tattooing practices or Western subcultures. There is limited empirical research that explores the motivations and symbolic meanings of tattoos among modern, urban Filipinos, especially across diverse gender identities, religions, and professions. Furthermore, few studies holistically examine the intersections of stigma, cultural meaning, social acceptance, and design choices in a way that bridges traditional, digital, and popular tattoo expressions in the Philippine setting.

This gap is critical in understanding how tattoos function today not merely as art or heritage, but as living expressions of identity, trauma, empowerment, and belief. By focusing on urban tattooed individuals in the Philippines and examining the full spectrum of their motivations and symbolic choices—while also analyzing social perception—this study offers a much-needed interdisciplinary lens. It connects sociocultural theory, identity politics, and media studies to the tangible and visible canvas of the body. Thus, this research is not only timely but also culturally and academically relevant in advancing both local and global understandings of body art in modern society.

## Research Objectives

1. To describe the demographic profile of individuals who have tattoos, particularly in the Philippine context.
2. To identify and analyze the various motivations behind individuals' decisions to acquire tattoos in modern society.
3. To interpret the symbolic meanings attributed to tattoos by individuals and how these meanings are influenced by cultural, social, personal, or emotional factors.
4. To explore how tattoos function as tools for self-expression and identity construction among individuals in contemporary Filipino society.
5. To examine the extent of perceived or experienced social stigma or acceptance that tattooed individuals face across institutional settings such as the workplace, religious communities, or family environments.
6. To compare motivational and symbolic differences in tattoo practices across demographic segments such as gender, generation, or religious orientation.



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7. To investigate the influence of media, pop culture, and indigenous traditions on the design choices and meanings of tattoos in the Philippines.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a descriptive-interpretive approach to explore the motivations, symbolic meanings, and social perceptions associated with tattooing among contemporary Filipinos. A qualitative design is appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, personal narratives, and cultural meanings that cannot be captured through quantitative metrics alone. By focusing on the lived experiences of tattooed individuals, this study seeks to uncover rich, context-specific insights into how tattoos function as expressions of identity, memory, and self-construction in modern Philippine society.

The study involved 20 participants selected through purposive sampling. This non-probability sampling technique allows the researcher to intentionally choose individuals who are best suited to provide relevant, insightful information. The selection criteria for participants include the following:

- a) Must be 18 years old and above
- b) Must currently reside in the Philippines (urban or semi-urban setting)
- c) Must have at least one visible and personally meaningful tattoo
- d) Must be willing to participate in a Key Informant Interview (KII)

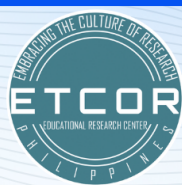
Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, religious background, and socioeconomic status, to gain a holistic understanding of tattoo culture across various social groups.

The primary method for data collection was Key Informant Interviews (KII). These were semi-structured, one-on-one interviews that allowed participants to speak freely about their motivations for getting tattoos, the meanings behind their designs, and their experiences of social acceptance or stigma. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across sessions while allowing flexibility based on each participant's responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secured video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, depending on the participant's availability and health safety considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to support in-depth thematic analysis.

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within narrative data. The process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcribed interviews. This was followed by the coding of significant statements and concepts, which were then grouped into major and minor themes related to the core areas of inquiry—namely motivations, symbolism, identity, and social perception. These themes were interpreted using established theoretical frameworks such as Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), Goffman's Theory of Stigma (1963), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970). These frameworks provided valuable lenses through which to understand how participants made sense of their tattoo choices and experiences. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations, triangulation and peer review were conducted during the analysis phase.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study strictly adhered to recognized research ethics protocols. Prior to participation, all informants were asked to sign an informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any point, and how their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to ensure anonymity in transcripts and published outputs. Furthermore, all digital materials—including audio recordings and transcripts—were securely stored in encrypted folders accessible only to the primary researcher. The rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants were safeguarded throughout the research process.





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## DISCUSSION

### Profile of Respondents

The participants ranged from ages 21 to 36, comprising 12 females, 7 males, and 1 non-binary individual. Educational backgrounds spanned from high school graduates (6 participants) to college degree holders (14 participants). Occupations included students, nurses, teachers, mechanics, tattoo artists, freelancers, and professionals such as IT specialists and social workers—demonstrating a broad occupational diversity. Religiously, the sample reflected the Philippines' pluralistic spirituality: 12 Catholic, 5 Christian or Born Again, 1 Muslim, and 1 Iglesia ni Cristo. Geographically, participants were based in urban and semi-urban areas like Manila, Cebu, Davao, and Baguio. This diverse demographic underscores the increasing normalization of tattoos across age, gender, and profession (Rivera, 2024; Coker, 2025).

### A. Motivations for Tattooing

Participants expressed a wide range of motivations for getting tattooed, many of which were deeply rooted in personal, emotional, or spiritual experiences. Some tattoos emerged from life-altering events, such as trauma or survival. For example, P1 shared that her tattoo followed a severe car accident and serves as a reminder that her life has a purpose. Similarly, P3 associated her butterfly tattoo with emotional recovery from a painful breakup—an experience that catalyzed personal growth and transformation. These narratives echo findings by Handoko and Green (2020), who emphasized that tattoos often mark recovery from crisis and function as emotional coping mechanisms.

Another motivational cluster emerged around family and relational milestones. P7, a mechanic from Baguio, had his child's birthday tattooed on his wrist, symbolizing fatherhood and commitment. P13 highlighted romantic loyalty through an infinity tattoo for his partner. These motivations reflect Maslow's (1970) esteem and belongingness needs, as participants described tattoos as extensions of love, connection, and relational affirmation.

Other participants cited personal growth and self-exploration as key motivators. P16 described her first tattoo as part of her "coming of age" and identity exploration. P14, a government employee, used tattooing as a way to reclaim her body after trauma—an empowering act of self-possession and healing. These reflections demonstrate how tattoos are tied to agency and bodily autonomy, especially among women and trauma survivors (Coker, 2025).

In several cases, tattoos were also framed as acts of rebellion or resistance. P11 expressed defiance against social norms, stating that she was told tattoos were "pang preso" (for criminals), but chose to get one anyway to challenge that narrative. Similarly, P17 described his tattoo as a means of negotiating his religious upbringing with his personal beliefs. These motivations support Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma resistance, where individuals assert their agency against normative social labels.

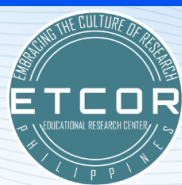
Collectively, these responses illustrate that motivations are highly individualized yet culturally informed. They stem not only from personal life histories but also from broader social, familial, and spiritual contexts. Whether as acts of survival, transformation, memory, or resistance, tattoos operate as emotional milestones etched onto the skin—marking identity shifts and lived experiences.

### B. Symbolic Meanings and Personal Significance

Beyond motivation, participants attributed profound symbolic meanings to their tattoos. These meanings often extended far beyond aesthetic preference and were rich with emotional, spiritual, and cultural significance. P2, for example, described her Bible verse tattoo as a "spiritual anchor," grounding her through life's challenges. This finding aligns with the work of Salvador-Amores (2021), who noted that religious and cultural symbols often function as tools of inner stability and ancestral connection.

For some participants, symbols represented strength and transformation. P4's tiger tattoo conveyed courage and inner strength—qualities he sought to embody during a difficult period in his life. P5's arrow tattoo symbolized progress and resilience in facing life's uncertainties. These interpretations are strongly tied to Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which asserts that people attach meaning to symbols through their personal and social interactions. Tattoos, in this view, become semiotic expressions of internal narratives.

The theme of commemoration and memory was also highly present. P12 had her mother's handwriting tattooed following her passing during the COVID-19 pandemic. P15 tattooed a star with the date of his brother's death—a form of embodied grief. These tattoos become living memorials, anchoring loss into tangible, permanent forms. Such expressions are consistent with studies by MacFarlane (2021), who suggests that tattoos act as "archival skin"—storing memory, grief, and love in ways words cannot.



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Notably, several participants chose tattoos with cultural or nationalistic symbolism. P8 proudly wore a Baybayin script tattoo, linking him to his indigenous Filipino roots. He was inspired by a documentary about pre-colonial tattooing and viewed it as an act of cultural revival. This finding supports the postcolonial framework emphasized by Ramirez et al. (2023), who noted that modern tattoos can be decolonial acts of remembering erased or suppressed identities.

Across cases, symbolic meanings reflected deeply personal but also collective narratives—spiritual grounding, transformation, resistance, and memory (Carvajal, 2024). These findings affirm that tattoos are semiotic landscapes, where the skin becomes a canvas of cultural, emotional, and existential meaning.

### C. Media, Trends, and Cultural Influence

Media and cultural influence emerged as a significant theme across participants' narratives. Digital platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and TikTok were identified as inspiration sources, especially among younger respondents. P3 referenced Instagram when deciding on her butterfly tattoo, while P5 browsed Pinterest boards for minimalist arrows. These trends affirm the growing influence of digital aesthetics and algorithmic exposure in shaping contemporary tattoo culture, consistent with Rivera (2024) and Biwang (2023).

However, not all media influences were superficial. P8 shared that his Baybayin tattoo was inspired by a documentary on indigenous Filipino practices, suggesting that educational and heritage-based content also influences tattoo decisions. P14, a government worker, noted that activist circles on social media helped her understand tattoos as political and bodily resistance. These responses support Salvador-Amores' (2021) view that tattoos are not only media-trendy but can be revived cultural artifacts in the digital age.

Interestingly, religious institutions also served as both inspirational and limiting forces. P2 and P17 referenced the church not as inspiration, but as a site of conflict. For them, religious doctrines either prohibited or morally questioned tattooing, forcing them to navigate a tension between personal expression and spiritual discipline. This dual influence of religion—as both suppressive and symbolic—reflects the complex hybrid cultural landscape of the Philippines (Soukup et al., 2021).

A subset of participants revealed no direct media influence, instead citing personal stories or spontaneous decisions. P1 and P13 stated that their tattoos were driven entirely by life events, with no online inspiration. This finding suggests that while media and trends shape a portion of tattoo choices, lived experiences remain the core driver of meaning and permanence.

Overall, media functions as both a mirror and a guide: amplifying aesthetic choices, reviving indigenous forms, and complicating how participants interact with cultural norms. Tattoos thus exist at the intersection of algorithm and ancestry, influenced by global flows and personal roots.

### D. Stigma and Social Acceptance

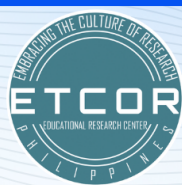
Despite the normalization of tattoos in mainstream culture, social stigma remains a persistent reality, particularly in professional and religious spaces. Several participants reported experiences of judgment, marginalization, or misunderstanding, highlighting the enduring stereotypes associated with body art in Filipino society.

P6, a call center agent, shared that she was subtly discriminated against at work due to her tattoo's visibility. P17 faced open criticism at church, saying, "They judged me as if I was sinful just because I had ink." P12 received backlash from religious family members after getting a commemorative tattoo for her mother. These accounts illustrate the stigmatizing forces described by Goffman (1963), who argued that individuals with socially discrediting attributes (like tattoos) are often reduced to a "spoiled identity."

Interestingly, stigma varied across contexts and generations. P7, a father and mechanic, said his tattoo was "accepted" by his peers, while P10, a non-binary entrepreneur, experienced affirmation and empowerment in their creative circles. This contrast suggests that acceptance is situational, shaped by occupation, religious affiliation, and peer subculture (Rivera, 2024; Carvajal, 2024).

Several participants used tattoos as tools to challenge stigma. P11 stated, "I got tattooed despite being told it was only for criminals." This act of defiance highlights how tattoos can resist dominant narratives and redefine personal agency. Similarly, P14 described tattooing as reclaiming her body after trauma, turning a stigmatized symbol into a statement of healing and empowerment.

The data confirms that while tattoos are increasingly visible, they continue to evoke complex social reactions. The negotiation between visibility and vulnerability is ongoing, as participants navigate between



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authenticity and societal judgment. These findings underscore the necessity of de-stigmatizing tattooed bodies, especially in professional and conservative settings.

### E. Self-Expression and Identity

One of the most consistently recurring themes among participants was the use of tattoos as a powerful tool for self-expression and identity construction. Across various genders, backgrounds, and belief systems, tattoos were framed not merely as aesthetic decisions but as embodied narratives of the self. Participants viewed their tattoos as an extension of who they are—both externally presented and internally felt.

P10, who identifies as non-binary, explained that their tattoos are a way to “express without needing to explain.” This narrative powerfully reflects how tattoos can offer visibility and voice to marginalized identities, especially among queer individuals navigating conservative social structures. Likewise, P9, a nurse and mental health advocate, spoke of her tattoos as “timeline markers” of her depression and recovery—making her ink a visual archive of resilience. These examples align with Blumer’s (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, where symbols (in this case, tattoos) serve as tools through which people define and express their identities in relation to social realities.

The notion of healing through tattooing also emerged. P14 noted that tattooing her body helped her reclaim it after trauma—marking a transition from vulnerability to empowerment. Tattoos, in this context, act as psychological armors or sites of personal agency, where the body is no longer passive but is actively reclaimed as a narrative space (Coker, 2025). Similarly, P16 referred to her tattoo as a symbol of “reinvention,” aligning her ink with the theme of personal transformation and the developmental task of identity formation in early adulthood.

Others used tattoos to affirm values, aspirations, or personality traits. P4, a graphic designer, said his tiger tattoo reflects the strength he wants to embody. P19 described his lion tattoo as a symbol of leadership—an identity he is working toward professionally. These aspirational uses of tattoos reflect Maslow’s self-actualization needs—where the ink becomes a mirror not just of who one is, but who one is striving to become (Maslow, 1970).

These findings clearly establish tattoos as multi-layered identity markers. They operate simultaneously at emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual levels. Far from being superficial or purely decorative, tattoos serve as intentional, symbolic extensions of the self—shaped by lived experience, internal states, and evolving aspirations.

### Concluding Analysis

The results of this study demonstrate that tattoos in modern Philippine society serve far more than decorative functions. They operate as complex social, psychological, and cultural artifacts—marking trauma, celebrating survival, expressing identity, and resisting stigma. Participants’ narratives revealed that tattooing is deeply personal yet inherently social: it involves negotiations between personal meaning and societal perception, between internal healing and external representation.

Drawing from Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), this study affirms that tattoos are not static symbols; their meanings are created, maintained, and transformed through interpersonal and cultural interaction. Goffman’s Theory of Stigma (1963) remains relevant, particularly in professional and religious contexts where tattooed individuals are still judged or stereotyped. At the same time, participants actively resist stigma, turning tattoos into declarations of identity, resilience, and agency.

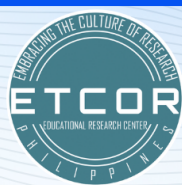
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs offers additional explanatory power, showing that tattoo motivations are not just about aesthetics or rebellion—they speak to deeper human needs: for connection, esteem, meaning, and self-actualization. For some, tattoos affirmed spirituality; for others, they offered healing after trauma; and for many, they helped construct a coherent sense of self in a fragmented world.

As such, tattoos should be understood not as “trends” or deviant markers, but as embodied texts—living inscriptions that narrate the wearer’s journey through love, loss, healing, faith, and growth. They are expressions of control, care, and consciousness—etched not only in ink but in meaning.

### Conclusion

This study set out to explore and interpret the motivations, symbolic meanings, and social perceptions surrounding tattoos among individuals in contemporary Philippine society. Through a qualitative research design involving 20 purposively selected participants, and using Key Informant Interviews (KII), the study uncovered a rich, nuanced understanding of tattooing as both a personal and social phenomenon. The findings respond directly to the research objectives and confirm that tattoos serve as multifaceted expressions of identity, memory, resistance, and healing.





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First, the study revealed that individuals who get tattoos come from diverse demographic backgrounds—spanning various ages, occupations, educational levels, and religious affiliations. This diversity affirms that tattooing has moved beyond subcultural boundaries and is now present across mainstream social groups in the Philippines. While motivations varied, common threads included emotional survival, personal transformation, religious grounding, familial love, and personal growth—all of which align with Maslow's hierarchy of psychological and existential needs.

Second, tattoos carried deeply symbolic meanings that extended far beyond their visual design. Participants associated their tattoos with strength, memory, peace, spirituality, and identity. These meanings were constructed through personal experiences, cultural heritage, and evolving life narratives, validating Blumer's (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of symbolic meanings. Moreover, indigenous symbols such as Baybayin and Filipino motifs were used to assert cultural pride and postcolonial identity.

Third, while tattoo culture is increasingly visible and normalized, participants reported ongoing stigma and social prejudice, particularly in religious and workplace contexts. Consistent with Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, tattoos were still viewed with suspicion by certain institutions and older generations. Nonetheless, some participants actively used their tattoos to resist such labels—reclaiming them as forms of empowerment, authenticity, and visibility.

Fourth, the study confirmed that tattoos are powerful tools of self-expression and identity construction, especially among younger generations and marginalized individuals. For some, tattoos served as visual affirmations of queer identity, mental health advocacy, or body reclamation after trauma. This further supports the idea that tattoos are not merely decorative but are meaning-laden acts of narrative inscription on the body.

Lastly, the influence of media and popular culture—including platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and activist communities—was found to shape tattoo trends, aesthetics, and even awareness of indigenous designs. The digital landscape, therefore, plays a dual role in the globalization and localization of tattoo meaning, enabling Filipinos to integrate both modern and traditional elements in their body art.

In sum, this research concludes that tattoos in the Philippines today are highly intentional, meaningful, and socially negotiated expressions. They are inscribed not only on skin but in culture, memory, belief, and resistance. As such, tattoos function as embodied texts—allowing individuals to navigate, express, and transform their place in a rapidly evolving society.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, which explored the motivations, symbolic meanings, and social perceptions of tattoos among the participants, the following recommendations are offered to various stakeholders including academic institutions, employers, policymakers, artists, and future researchers:

### 1. For Academic and Cultural Researchers

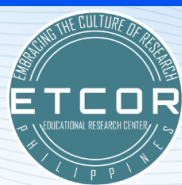
It is recommended that future researchers explore tattoos not only as aesthetic or psychological artifacts but also as socio-political texts. Research may expand into regional, ethnic, and religious subcultures where tattoo meanings are still underexplored. Longitudinal studies can also examine how tattoo meanings evolve over time, particularly in relation to mental health, identity development, or trauma recovery.

Furthermore, researchers should consider cross-cultural comparative studies within Southeast Asia, examining how tattoo symbolism shifts across different belief systems and social norms. Indigenous and postcolonial perspectives on tattooing—especially involving practitioners like Whang-Od and batok traditions—should be documented and preserved with ethical cultural sensitivity.

### 2. For Employers and HR Practitioners

The findings indicate that tattoos continue to be stigmatized in formal workplaces, despite being expressions of identity and healing for many individuals. Employers are encouraged to revisit outdated grooming policies and adopt a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach toward tattooed employees. Workplace training may also help address unconscious bias and foster a more diverse and tolerant environment.

Companies should assess individuals based on merit and competence rather than physical appearance, and actively work to deconstruct stereotypes that associate tattoos with deviance or unprofessionalism—especially since many participants in the study were highly educated professionals or service providers.



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### 3. For Religious and Cultural Institutions

This study revealed that some participants experienced spiritual conflict or religious rejection due to their tattoos. Faith-based organizations are encouraged to open dialogue around the evolving role of body art as a personal testimony, healing ritual, or expression of spirituality. Institutions should seek a theological re-evaluation of tattooing—shifting away from condemnation toward compassion and understanding.

Workshops, forums, or inclusive sermons could explore how tattooed individuals experience faith, bridging generational gaps and challenging harmful moral dichotomies between body modification and holiness.

### 4. For Tattoo Artists and Cultural Creatives

Tattoo artists are encouraged to continue approaching their practice not just as visual design, but as a form of personal storytelling and emotional support. The research found that many participants view tattoos as therapeutic and identity-affirming. Artists should consider expanding their role as storykeepers, offering clients time, space, and respectful dialogue around the meanings they wish to inscribe.

It is also recommended that artists educate clients about cultural symbols (e.g., Baybayin, tribal marks) to prevent appropriation and ensure that traditional designs are inked with understanding and consent. Collaboration with cultural scholars and elders is also advised when reviving indigenous forms of tattooing.

### 5. For Mental Health and Social Workers

Given that many participants used tattoos to cope with grief, trauma, or mental illness, professionals in the mental health field should consider tattooing as a legitimate expression of recovery and identity formation. Counseling services may even include tattoo narratives in therapy sessions as symbolic storytelling tools, helping clients unpack the emotional layers behind their body art.

Mental health awareness campaigns can also partner with tattoo communities to promote resilience, healing, and self-care, especially among youth and LGBTQ+ individuals who often turn to tattooing as a space of freedom and self-definition.

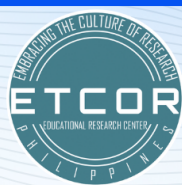
### 6. For Policymakers and Advocacy Groups

Policy initiatives should support body-positive and inclusive practices in education, employment, and media. Anti-discrimination campaigns can broaden their focus to include tattooed individuals, especially those marginalized by class, religion, or gender. Policies that reinforce grooming standards in schools and workplaces should be critically evaluated to avoid limiting individual freedom and cultural expression.

Tattoo-related health regulations should also be standardized and widely disseminated to ensure the safety and dignity of clients and artists alike, particularly in informal or indigenous settings.

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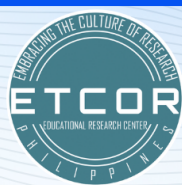
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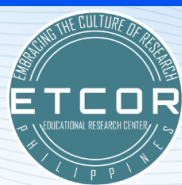
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## Appendix A

### Table of Responses of Key Informants

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Religion	Location
P1	23	Female	College	Student	Catholic	Manila
P2	30	Female	College	Teacher	Christian	Cebu
P3	26	Female	High school	Barista	Catholic	Quezon City
P4	34	Male	College	Graphic Designer	None	Davao
P5	21	Male	College	Freelancer	Catholic	Cavite
P6	28	Female	College	Call Center Agent	Christian	Iloilo
P7	35	Male	High school	Mechanic	Catholic	Baguio
P8	24	Male	College	Engineer	Catholic	Makati
P9	27	Female	College	Nurse	Christian	Pasig
P10	22	Non-binary	College	Entrepreneur	Catholic	Laguna
P11	31	Male	High school	Construction worker	Catholic	Taguig
P12	29	Female	College	HR Officer	Christian	Batangas
P13	33	Male	College	Entrepreneur	Born Again	Quezon City
P14	26	Female	College	Govt Employee	Catholic	Manila
P15	36	Male	High School	Driver	Muslim	Zamboanga
P16	25	Female	College	Nursing Student	Catholic	Cavite
P17	30	Male	College	IT Professional	Iglesia	Bohol
P18	32	Female	College	Yoga Instructor	Catholic	Manila
P19	28	Male	College	Sales Manager	Christian	Cebu
P20	27	Female	College	Social Worker	Catholic	Manila

Participant	Motivation	Symbolic Meaning	Media Influence	Stigma	Self-Expression / Identity
P1	Survival after accident	Reminder of life purpose	No	None	Affirmation of survival
P2	Faith-based grounding	Spiritual anchor	Church	None	Spiritual self
P3	Healing from breakup	Transformation	Instagram	Mild	Healing identity
P4	Inner strength	Courage and power	None	None	Symbol of power
P5	Overcoming hardship	Resilience and progress	Pinterest	Mild	Progression
P6	Self-expression	Creativity	Music icons	Workplace discrimination	Creativity
P7	Family	Love for child	No	Accepted	Fatherhood



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	dedication				
P8	Cultural pride	Heritage revival	Yes (documentary)	Mixed	Pride in roots
P9	Mental health awareness	Journey through depression	Mental health blogs	Some judgment	Mental health advocate
P10	Artistic identity	Visual identity	Art platforms	None	Queer identity
P11	Defiance against norms	Breaking stereotypes	Peer group	Labeled delinquent	Resistance
P12	Loss of parent	Memory preservation	Tiktok	Religious backlash	Emotional tribute
P13	Romantic symbolism	Commitment	YouTube	None	Loyalty and love
P14	Body reclamation	Body autonomy	Activist circles	Empowered	Empowerment
P15	Sibling remembrance	Grief	Personal	Family disapproval	Commemoration
P16	Self-discovery	Coming of age	Reddit	None	Reinvention
P17	Religious friction	Conflict with tradition	Church	Judged at church	Religious tension
P18	Mental peace	Calm and balance	Wellness influencers	None	Spiritual balance
P19	Leadership identity	Masculine strength	Motivational speaker	Corporate pressure	Ambition
P20	Coping with anxiety	Healing mantra	Tumblr	Some disapproval	Mental resilience