

# Inked in Time and Space: Exploring the Documentality of Tattoos

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**Abstract:** This project explores whether tattoos possess, according to those who sport them, the characteristics of a document and, if yes, to what extent. Eighty-eight tattoos, which were described in eighteen in-depth interviews with tattooed adults, are used as units of analysis and analysed following a conceptual framework that focuses on the complementarity of the material, mental and social aspects of documents. The analysis of the mental (or informational) aspect of tattoos indicates that participants distinctly distinguish between tattoos carrying a meaning from those that are purely aesthetic, and that the two types of tattoos can easily cohabit on the same person. The analysis of the social (or communicational) aspect of tattoos is divided into two sub-aspects: the choice of localization on the body and the choice of visual elements. Both, among the participants, were considered thoughtfully and, united, they often become a well-considered communication strategy. Results indicate that, while all tattoos carry material and social aspects, only those that carry a meaning for the individual sporting them appear to possess a clear mental aspect that would make them documents.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Many reasons can motivate one to acquire a tattoo: to represent who one is or what one has lived, to express one's relationship with society or a particular group, to protect oneself or simply to magnify the beauty of one's specific body part (Dickson et al. 2015; Kang and Jones 2007; Silver, VanEseltine and Silver 2009). Associated with a certain nonconformity and with antisocial behaviour, such as criminality, tattoos have long carried a negative connotation in the Western world, and they are sometimes perceived as a cultural provocation (Adams 2010; DeMello 1995; Firmin et al. 2012; Hawkes et al. 2004; Pitts 1998). Yet, body modifications such as tattoos have become predictable and banal, and the presence of a tattoo, in many

circles, is no longer considered an indicator of bad school performance (Dundes and Francis 2016) or negative treatment in the workplace (French et al. 2016).

Tattoos are considered to be a means of non-verbal communication with a meaning that varies from one person to another and a communicative power that is mostly referential (Kosut 2000; Paveau 2009). The messages that tattoos transmit to an audience that is more or less public depending on their locations on one's body permanently mark—while being changeable and erasable—the skin of their bearer. This project examines tattoos as documents. To define "documents," as summarized by Michael Buckland (1997), questions now turn to the social construction of meaning, the viewer's perception of significance and the evidential character.

## 2.0 Document, documentation and documentalist

In the 1950s, expressions such as “information science,” “information storage and retrieval” and “information management” replaced the old-fashioned “documentation,” which used to name the techniques surrounding the management of printed documents (Buckland 1997, 1999). Yet, as Buckland (1997) indicates, there is no reason why documentation should focus solely on printed textual materials. Otlet (1934) considered that objects could be seen as documents, as they supply information through their observation. For Briet (1951), a document is a proof supporting a fact. More specifically, Briet argues that a document can be defined as any symbolic or concrete clue, recorded in one way or another, that represents, reconstitutes or proves an intellectual or physical phenomenon. The dominant idea among documentalists, according to Buckland (1997), is that documents should be defined according to their functions rather than by their format.

Even if, by attribution, anything can become a document (Buckland 1997), recent works have established characteristics to which a document must conform. In his literature review, Lund (2009), indicates that, traditionally, works have focused on the material aspect of documents, while current works have turned to social and perceptual aspects. As Tim Gorichanaz (2015) concludes, a document needs the presence of a human intervention and it cannot be separated from its context. For Lund (2004), a document only exists in the complementarity of material, social (or communicational) and mental (or informational) aspects. That conceptual framework was also used by O’Connor and colleagues (2008) and by Skare (2009). Of the three aspects, the mental one remains the least studied. Buckland (2015), stresses the importance of studying the mental relationship between individuals and documents.

## 3.0 Methodology

This research project seeks to explore whether tattoos possess, according to those who sport them, the characteristics of a document and, if so, to what extent. This descriptive study uses a qualitative methodology. Data were collected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton 2015). In-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen tattooed individuals who were asked to talk about the story of each of their tattoos, the elements composing them and the choice of location on their body. The sample is composed of tattooed adults recruited among the population of a large Canadian university.

The eighty-eight tattoos described by participants constitute the units of analysis. They were analysed using an approach based on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 2015; Glaser and Strauss 1967), following a concep-

tual framework developed by Lund (2004) that focuses on the complementarity of the material, mental and social aspects. Particular attention was given to the mental aspect, notably the meaning given to a tattoo at the time of its creation compared to its meaning today. Grounded theory uses an open coding that allows for new categories to be included as they arise. In this project, data collection and analysis were conducted in an iterative manner to allow for the progressive inclusion of emerging themes in the interview guide. To ensure the quality of the analysis, an inter-coder evaluation was conducted. The agreement rate indicates that the coding scheme was clear and cohesive, and that it reflects the themes revealed by the data.

## 4.0 Results

The conceptual framework developed by Lund (2004) comprises three aspects: material, mental and social. Being body modifications, all tattoos possess a material aspect. During the analysis, the mental and social aspects appeared more pertinent to establish the documentality of tattoos, and they were thus studied in more depth. Characteristics pertaining to the material aspect, when relevant, are presented in relationship with the mental and social aspects.

### 4.1 Mental aspects of tattoos

The analysis of the mental (or informational) aspect of tattoos indicates that participants distinctly distinguish between tattoos carrying a meaning from those that are purely aesthetic. The two types of tattoos can easily cohabit on the same person. For the participants, tattoos carrying a meaning testify to something (particular event, transition, period) or possess a particular function, such as a protective one, in the image of a talisman. Situations recalled by the participants vary greatly: departure from the family home, loss of a special person, fight against anorexia, travel abroad, meeting a significant other, acceptance into a prestigious university program. Every participant mentioned at least one tattoo carrying a meaning.

That meaning is at times expressed in words. Some participants chose a noun, a date, their personal motto or a telling quote. For instance, a participant chose “Positive Energy, Peaceful Serenity,” a motto which she coined in her teens and which she feels keeps her grounded. More often, among the participants, meaning is expressed in the symbolism of the visual elements. A participant, for instance, described a cup of coffee surrounded by flowers as a tribute to her mother suffering from dementia. Coffee, because of all the conversations that they used to have around that beverage, but also the cup, which is at the image of those in her mother’s favourite china set, and the flowers that used to grow in her mother’s garden. Each

element, when explained, allows one to understand the meaning of the tattoo. The body part where a tattoo is located can also symbolize something for the bearer, as in that tattoo representing the logo of an eating disorder support group that a participant described as becoming visually distorted if she loses weight.

For the participants, tattoos carrying a meaning are often anchored in time and space. Many participants mentioned having been tattooed while visiting a particular place. Even if the tattoo does not commemorate the visit itself, it becomes a memento of the moment when it was made. A participant, for instance, mentioned that he liked the idea that his first tattoo is associated with his first trip to New York, a city that he adores. Even if the tattoo has nothing to do with New York, he appreciates that it reminds him of this memorable trip. The analysis also indicates that, for tattoos carrying a meaning, keeping the original aspect of the tattoo is important, even if it becomes visually unloved or associated with bad memories. Participants often evoked accepting “youthful indiscretions” or time’s passing.

Participants who talked about purely aesthetic tattoos clearly distinguished them from those carrying a meaning. Tattoos in that second category were chosen for different reasons, such as the wish to wear the work of a particular artist or a friend, or the desire to magnify the beauty of a body part or to visually balance other tattoos. Participants were less attached to the visual aspects of purely aesthetic tattoos, with the notable exception of those created by a renowned artist. Many participants talked about their purely aesthetic tattoos as works in perpetual progress, often indicating that old tattoos had been masked or integrated in a new one.

#### 4.2 Social aspect of tattoos

The analysis of the social (or communicational) aspect of tattoos is divided into two sub-aspects: the choice of localization on the body, first, then the choice of visual elements. Both, among the participants, were considered thoughtfully. United, they often become a well-considered communication strategy.

In their choices of body locations, participants clearly distinguished places that are usually revealed (hands, neck, face), those that are easily concealable places following their clothing habits, and those that are usually hidden, such as a buttock. The choice of a site category varies according to a communication desire. Tattoos on the knuckles or on the face, for example, were a deliberate choice for the participants who chose such locations, because they are in plain sight and it is also very difficult to hide them. Conversely, a tattoo on the groin was chosen to be displayed only to a very restricted circle of intimates. Many partici-

pants chose a site which allows them to reveal the tattoo only when they want to do so. Interestingly, some sites were chosen with the deliberate goal of showing only a portion of the tattoo when “normally clothed,” that is to say clothed according to their usual habits. Participants mentioned using this strategy to draw attention to a specific tattoo, citing the erotic power of peek-a-boo elements, even on body parts that generally lack arousal capabilities, such as collarbones.

The social aspect of tattoos is also defined by the choice of visual elements and the ease with which their symbolism can be understood. The use of words in a language commonly spoken in the environment of the tattooed individual is an intentional choice. Everyone, observing a tattoo comprising understood words, can draw conclusions about its meaning. The choice of using words, among the participants, was conscious. For some participants, such a tattoo is used to send a clear message; for others, it becomes a starting point for discussions. A foreign language, especially a rare one, adds a layer of complexity and was used among the participants to develop a relationship with those who understand it. Likewise, the use of a symbol peculiar to a fictional universe, such as the *Triforce* from the Legend of Zelda or the *Deathly Hallows* from Harry Potter, permits a connection with those who recognize them. Conversely, the use of visual elements that are only understood by the person sporting the tattoo or those who have received the key allows a person to reveal the story behind the tattoo, completely or partially, when it is desired to do so.

#### 5.0 Discussion

According to Lund’s (2004) conceptual framework, with the synergy of their material, mental and social aspects, tattoos carrying a meaning share the characteristics of a document. These three aspects, as Skare (2009) mentions, cannot be totally detached from one another. For the person sporting it, a tattoo carrying a meaning has a mental aspect that is inscribed in its symbolism. This symbolism defined most of the materiality of the tattoo, which is complemented by the choice of body location and the explicitness of the symbolism.

One interesting element resulting from the analysis is the choice of the body location. Choosing to be tattooed on a hidden body part means that the message will be available only to a selected audience, while the message of a highly visible tattoo will be available for everyone to see. The choice of this location can influence the content of the message. For some participants, choosing a hidden location for a tattoo allowed them to use a more explicit symbolism. As Kosut (2000) mentions, some tattoos are addressed to specific individuals or communities, and indi-

viduals, through their tattoos, engage in conversation larger than themselves. Some participants were not always conscious of the messages sent by some of their tattoos at the time of their creation.

Some participants chose a specific design for aesthetic or practical reasons, such as the price, that had nothing to do with a specific message. Others chose deliberately to be tattooed in a visible location using a symbol that needs to be explained to most people, such as symbols taken from a foreign script. If tattoos are a form of communication, the message behind the choice of an exotic symbol in a visible location could be interpreted as: "I have a mysterious symbol on my arm, and, if you want to know more about it, I invite you to interact with me and ask me directly."

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, the large proportion of tattoos carrying a meaning in comparison with purely aesthetic ones might have been caused by the choice of the population and the sampling mode: those who decided to answer an ad to talk about their tattoos may be more conscious about the meaning behind them. It is also possible that some participants embellished details to create a more interesting story.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This study on the documentality of tattoos uses a conceptual framework (Lund 2004) that has proven its pertinence to the study of documents in non-traditional forms. This project also supports the importance of studying the mental aspect of documents, as mentioned by Buckland (2015), and Gorichanaz and Latham (2016). Indeed, while all tattoos carry material and social aspects, only those which carry a meaning for the individual sporting them possess a mental aspect that allows their classification as documents. A few participants mentioned purely aesthetic tattoos that were created by renowned artists, which in themselves could be considered to be documents by the artist, but data were too sparse for that kind of tattoo to draw any conclusion about their documentality.

Through direct contributions from tattooed individuals, this study also traces a portrait of tattoos as communication tools; testimonies gathered highlight the function of corporal modifications to communicate with others. Tattoos have become a medium in which one is free to express oneself freely. According to Kosut (2000), tattoos reveal information about the ways in which one's body and identity are interconnected. Even if a tattoo is not unique, the message behind it might as well be.

Almost all the participants in this study (seventeen out of eighteen) mentioned that, whether they currently had one tattoo or "more than they could count," they would probably get new ones in the future. Having a first tattoo

changed their perspective about them. It would be interesting to study the perception of tattoos, from the perspective of tattooed and non-tattooed individuals, to know what kinds of messages are perceived by viewers. Do messages that are implied by those who wear them really reach their objective and, if so, how?

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