



EXPLORING BODY ESTEEM, AGGRESSION, MOTIVATION, PERSONALITY, COPING, AND TRAUMA AMONG TATTOOED VS NON-TATTOOED INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored psychological differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals across multiple variables, including body esteem, aggression, conformity, motivation, personality, coping styles, and trauma. A cross-sectional comparative design was employed with a purposive sample of 100 young adults (50 tattooed and 50 non-tattooed) aged 18–35 years, residing in Rajasthan. Standardized instruments such as the Body Esteem Scale-Revised, Brief Aggression Questionnaire, Coping Mechanism Questionnaire, Conformity Scale, Mini-IPIP, Situational Motivation Scale, and Trauma Checklist for Adults were administered. Data were analysed using independent samples t-tests and Pearson's correlations via IBM SPSS Statistics. Results indicated that tattooed individuals scored significantly higher on body esteem attribution, intrinsic motivation, and physical and verbal aggression, while reporting lower trauma scores compared to non-tattooed participants. No significant group differences were observed in conformity, coping, or personality dimensions. Correlational analysis revealed positive relationships among motivation, body esteem, coping, and aggression, suggesting a psychologically adaptive function of tattoos. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses further supported that tattoos symbolized meaning-making, empowerment, healing, and self-definition. Overall, findings highlight that tattooing, within the Indian context, is less about deviance and more about self-expression, identity formation, and emotional resilience. The study contributes to the limited Indian literature on body modification, offering implications for mental health professionals to view tattooing as a tool of self-narrative, emotional regulation, and psychosocial adjustment.

KEYWORDS : Tattooing, Body esteem, Motivation, Coping styles, Personality, Aggression, Trauma, Identity, Indian youth

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing is a globally visible form of body modification that has evolved from ritualistic and stigmatized origins to a contemporary practice of aesthetic, symbolic, and psychological expression. Once tied to group identity or deviance, tattooing today represents a medium for self-expression, emotional regulation, and social signalling (Atkinson, 2003; Caplan, 2000). Anthropological and sociological perspectives emphasize tattoos as markers of life transitions, memory, and community affiliation (Sanders, 1989; Rubin, 1988), while psychological research now interprets tattooing as a complex behaviour linked with coping, self-concept, and meaning-making (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007; Dickinson & Green, 2018).

Studies indicate that tattoos may relate to individual differences in body esteem, motivation, coping, personality, and trauma histories (Franzoi & Shields, 1984; Carmen et al., 2012). Body esteem, a key aspect of body image, shapes self-concept and social confidence (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Tattoos can help individuals reclaim or modify their bodily self, enhancing perceived ownership and reducing shame (Kluger, 2021; Lau & Van den Berg, 2019). Yet, research also notes that tattoos may affect how individuals believe others view them rather than their private body satisfaction (Swami et al., 2012).

Motivations for tattooing are diverse. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), tattoos may stem from intrinsic motives (self-expression), identified motives (value alignment), extrinsic motives (social recognition), or amotivation. Research highlights tattoos as expressions of meaning, belonging, or impulsivity (Houghton & Joinson, 2010; Dickson et al., 2015). Hence, motivation patterns distinguish identity-driven tattooing from other psychosocial behaviours.

Aggression, often linked to tattoos in early deviance-based literature, has been reconceptualized as assertiveness or agency rather than hostility (Carroll & Anderson, 2002; Nathanson et al., 2006; Berent et al., 2020). Thus, precise measurement of aggression dimensions is essential to avoid misinterpretation.

Tattooing also emerges as a coping mechanism. Qualitative studies describe tattoos as narrative therapy — symbols of resilience, recovery, or closure following distress (Williams & Gardner, 2008; Marraccini et al., 2020). Personality studies further associate tattooing with openness and sensation seeking (Martin et al., 2013; Roberti, 2004), though findings vary, implying an interaction between traits, motives, and cultural context (Armstrong et al., 2019).

In India, tattoos have transitioned from tribal and ritual traditions to urban expressions of identity influenced by globalization and youth culture (Rao, 2019; Sharma, 2021). However, empirical Indian research remains limited. Understanding how tattooing relates to body esteem, aggression, coping, motivation, trauma, and personality within this context is vital.

Therefore, the present study adopts a comparative mixed-method design to examine tattooed and non-tattooed young adults (18–35 years) in Rajasthan, India, across body esteem, aggression, conformity, coping, motivation, trauma, and personality. Integrating psychometric assessment with qualitative narratives, it aims to clarify whether tattoos in India function as symbols of resilience and identity or reflect maladaptive outcomes, contributing to a culturally grounded psychology of tattooing.

AIM

To compare the levels of body esteem, aggression, conformity, motivation, personality, coping styles, and trauma between individuals who are tattooed and those who are not, and to examine the relationships among these psychological variables.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To compare body esteem between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
2. To compare aggression levels between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
3. To compare coping styles between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
4. To compare levels of conformity between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
5. To compare personality traits between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
6. To compare levels of motivation between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
7. To compare trauma experiences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals.
8. To examine interrelationships among body esteem, aggression, conformity, motivation, personality, coping, and trauma across the entire sample.

Hypothesis

Null Hypotheses (H_0):

H_{01} : There will be no significant difference between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals on levels of body esteem, aggression, conformity,

motivation, personality, coping, and trauma.

H₁₁: There will be a significant difference between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals on these variables.

H₀₂: There will be no significant relationship among body esteem, aggression, conformity, motivation, personality, coping, and trauma.

H₁₂: There will be a significant relationship among these variables.

METHODS

Study Design: A Comparative Cross-Sectional Mixed-Method Design

Sample

A total of 100 young adults (N = 100) aged between 18 and 35 years, residing in Rajasthan, participated in the study. The sample comprised 50 tattooed and 50 non-tattooed individuals of both genders, selected through purposive sampling from urban and semi-urban settings such as colleges, workplaces, tattoo studios, and community spaces.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Male and female participants aged 18–35 years.
- Minimum education level of 10th standard.
- Residing in Rajasthan.
- For tattooed participants: at least one permanent tattoo.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Major psychiatric illness or cognitive impairment.
- Physical disabilities interfering with participation.
- Temporary or henna tattoos.
- Illiterate or uneducated individuals.

Tools Used:

1. Socio-Demographic Data Sheet – Designed by the researcher to record demographic details such as age, gender, education, occupation, family type, and residence.
2. Body Esteem Scale-Revised (BES-R; Franzoi & Shields, 1984): Measures body self-esteem across appearance, weight, and attribution dimensions; reliability coefficients range from 0.78 to 0.92.
3. Brief Aggression Questionnaire (BAQ): A 12-item measure assessing physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility; reliability 0.70–0.80.
4. Coping Mechanism Questionnaire (Banyard, Grych, & Hamby): Measures problem-focused and emotion-focused coping; $\alpha = 0.90$.
5. Conformity Scale (Mehrabian & Steffl, 1995): 11 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale; reliability 0.80–0.85.
6. Trauma Checklist for Adults (TCA): Assesses lifetime exposure to traumatic events; reliability 0.80–0.90.
7. Situational Motivation Scale (SIMS; Blanchard, Vallerand, & Guay, 2000): 16 items measuring intrinsic, extrinsic, identified, and amotivation dimensions.
8. Mini-IPIP Scale (Donnellan et al., 2006): 20 items assessing the Big Five personality traits-Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical clearance from the institutional review board, participants were contacted both in person and online. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Questionnaires were administered individually or in small groups. Tattooed participants also responded to open-ended questions regarding their tattoo's motivation, meaning, emotional impact, and satisfaction. All responses were recorded anonymously to maintain confidentiality. Data collection was completed over approximately three months.

Analysis Of Data

The collected data were statistically analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to summarize demographic and psychological variables.

Inferential Statistics Included:

1. Independent-sample *t*-tests to compare tattooed and non-tattooed groups across variables.
2. Pearson's correlation coefficients to examine interrelationships among body esteem, aggression, coping, conformity, motivation, personality, and trauma.
3. Thematic content analysis for qualitative data to identify recurring themes in tattooed participants' narratives regarding meaning and experience.

RESULT

The present study examined psychological differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals and explored relationships among body esteem, aggression, coping, conformity, motivation, personality, and trauma. A total of 100 participants (50 tattooed, 50 non-tattooed) aged 18–35 years were assessed. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to understand tattooing as a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon.

Descriptive Findings

Table 1: Age-wise distribution of participants (N = 100)

Age	Inked	%	Non-inked	%	Total	%
19–28	36	72	27	54	63	63
29–35	14	28	23	46	37	37

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by age. Tattooing was most prevalent among younger adults (19–28 years), with the largest proportion at age 25 (17%). Non-tattooed individuals were more common in the 30–35-year range, indicating a generational trend toward body modification among younger participants.

Table 2: Sociodemographic Characteristics (N = 100)

Variable	Inked n (%)	Non-inked n (%)
Female	34 (68%)	30 (60%)
Urban residence	35 (70%)	27 (54%)
Students	27 (54%)	27 (54%)
Joint family	23 (46%)	15 (30%)

Tattooed participants were predominantly female (68%), urban (70%), and students (54%) (Table 2). This pattern reflects cultural clustering of tattoo practices among educated, urban young women in Rajasthan. Independent-samples *t*-tests showed no significant age difference between groups ($t = 0.86$, $p = .390$), but tattooed participants reported higher education levels ($p < .001$), suggesting greater exposure and acceptance of tattooing among educated youth.

Group Comparisons On Psychological Variables

Table 3: Comparison Of Tattooed And Non-tattooed Participants On Psychological Variables

Variable	Non-inked M (SD)	Inked M (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Body Esteem – Attribution	35.6 (4.7)	39.0 (4.5)	2.29	.024*
Aggression – Physical	12.1 (2.9)	14.6 (3.0)	2.59	.011*
Aggression – Verbal	13.5 (2.7)	15.8 (2.7)	3.38	.001**
Trauma	16.4 (4.1)	14.5 (3.9)	2.23	.029*
Intrinsic Motivation	13.7 (3.7)	18.4 (3.7)	3.74	.001**
External Motivation	13.7 (4.1)	17.6 (3.9)	3.17	.002**
Identified Motivation	14.0 (4.0)	17.8 (4.0)	3.07	.004**
Amotivation	14.2 (4.0)	17.9 (4.1)	3.13	.003**
Conformity	44.2 (4.3)	43.7 (4.3)	0.38	.701
Coping	35.8 (5.1)	36.8 (4.9)	0.64	.520
Big Five Traits	–	–	ns	> .05

($p < .05$ *, $*p < .01$)

Table 3 summarizes mean differences across body esteem, aggression, coping, conformity, trauma, motivation, and personality traits.

Significant differences emerged for body-esteem attribution ($p = .024$), physical aggression ($p = .011$), verbal aggression ($p = .001$), trauma ($p = .029$), and all motivation subtypes intrinsic, external, identified, and amotivation (all $p < .005$). No group differences appeared for coping, conformity, or personality traits.

These results indicate that tattooed participants experienced higher self-confidence regarding how others perceive their bodies, exhibited greater assertive aggression, showed stronger motivation, and reported lower trauma levels. No evidence supported differences in emotional stability, social conformity, or dispositional personality.

Intercorrelations Among Psychological Variables

Table 4: Correlations Among Major Variables

Variable	Aggression	Coping	Conformity	Personality	Motivation	Trauma	Body Esteem
Aggression	1	.38**	.34**	-.25*	.44**	-.09	.22*
Coping	.38**	1	.26*	-.53**	.46**	.18	.05
Conformity	.34**	.26*	1	-.51**	.39**	.09	.32**

Personality	-.25*	-.53**	-.51**	1	-.45**	-.17	.43**
Motivation	.44**	.46**	.39**	-.45**	1	.12	.21*
Trauma	-.09	.18	.09	-.17	.12	1	-.09
Body Esteem	.22*	.05	.32**	.43**	.21*	-.09	1

($p < .05$ *, $p < .01$)

Pearson's correlations (Table 4) revealed several significant associations.

Aggression correlated positively with coping ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), conformity ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), and motivation ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), implying that assertive energy may be linked with adaptive emotion management and goal orientation. Coping also correlated positively with motivation ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). Body esteem showed positive relationships with motivation ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) and personality ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher self-image aligns with motivated and emotionally stable profiles. Trauma showed no significant correlation with other constructs.

These findings collectively depict tattooed individuals as assertive, expressive, and intrinsically motivated, showing healthy self-esteem and effective coping patterns.

Qualitative Findings

Open-ended responses from tattooed participants ($n = 50$) underwent thematic analysis, yielding four recurring themes:

Meaning-making and Tribute: Tattoos commemorated life events, relationships, and core values, reflecting continuity of identity and memory.

Emotional Impact: Participants described empowerment, catharsis, and emotional healing; many associated tattooing with reclaiming control after distress.

Tattoo Experience: The process was described as “satisfying,” “therapeutic,” and “symbolic of freedom,” supporting research that links body modification to positive affect and self-acceptance.

Future Intention: Over 12% of responses reflected plans for additional tattoos, portraying tattooing as an ongoing narrative of self-evolution.

These themes confirm tattoos as embodied tools of resilience, emotional regulation, and identity formation rather than acts of deviance.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine psychological differences between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals across domains of body esteem, aggression, motivation, conformity, coping, personality, and trauma. A comparative cross-sectional mixed-method design was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of tattooing as a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon within the Indian context.

Body Esteem And Tattoos

Findings revealed that tattooed individuals reported significantly higher scores on the body-esteem attribution subscale, suggesting greater confidence regarding how they believe others perceive their bodies. This aligns with earlier work by Franzoi and Shields (1984) and Swami et al. (2012), indicating that tattoos may enhance perceived social approval and strengthen body-related self-image. Tattoos serve as visible affirmations of personal meaning and autonomy, allowing individuals to redefine their bodily identity and reduce shame (Kluger, 2021; Lau & Van den Berg, 2019). In the Indian context, this may reflect growing self-acceptance and social assertion among urban youth using tattoos to express individuality within traditionally conformist social frameworks.

Aggression And Assertiveness

Tattooed participants demonstrated higher physical and verbal aggression scores. However, rather than reflecting hostility, this pattern is better interpreted as adaptive assertiveness or boundary-setting behaviour. Prior studies (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006; Berent et al., 2020) suggest that elevated aggression scores among tattooed individuals often represent agency, self-assertion, and the communication of personal strength. These findings indicate that tattoos may symbolize empowerment rather than aggression, aligning with global trends viewing body modification as a means of reclaiming control and self-definition.

Motivation Profiles

Significant group differences across all motivation dimensions—intrinsic, identified, external, and amotivation—highlight the diverse motivational structure underlying tattooing. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), tattooed individuals demonstrated stronger intrinsic and identified motivation, reflecting personal meaning and value alignment. Tattoos were often described in qualitative responses as therapeutic, symbolic of life experiences, and markers of resilience, confirming earlier studies that link tattoos with self-expression and emotional healing (Houghton & Joinson, 2010; Dickson et al., 2015).

Trauma And Coping

Tattooed participants reported lower trauma scores than non-tattooed individuals. This finding challenges traditional assumptions that tattoos are compensatory markers of distress or deviance (Carroll & Anderson, 2002; Keuthen et al., 2010). Instead, it supports the interpretation of tattoos as tools for recovery and meaning reconstruction. Studies by Williams and Gardner (2008) and Marraccini et al. (2020) similarly describe tattooing as narrative therapy—a form of symbolic healing that transforms emotional pain into self-affirmation. Tattoos may, therefore, represent closure rather than symptomatology, serving as visible embodiments of resilience.

Coping, Conformity, And Personality

No significant differences were found in coping mechanisms, conformity, or personality traits between the groups. This suggests that tattooed individuals are psychologically well-adjusted and functionally comparable to their non-tattooed counterparts in emotional regulation and social integration. These findings align with Armstrong et al. (2019) and Zestcott et al. (2021), who argue that tattoos have become normalized expressions of identity in modern societies, no longer linked to deviance or maladjustment. The lack of personality differences indicates that dispositional factors alone do not determine tattooing behaviour; rather, it is shaped by cultural exposure, meaning-making, and situational motives.

Cultural Context And Gender Trends

Cultural interpretation is essential for understanding the psychological implications of tattoos in India. The higher representation of women and urban participants in the tattooed group reflects changing attitudes toward body autonomy and self-expression among young Indian women (Singh, 2020; Sharma, 2021). Tattoos have transitioned from tribal and religious identifiers to symbols of individuality, empowerment, and identity reconstruction influenced by globalization and media exposure. This shift underscores the modernization of body modification practices in India, where tattoos signify autonomy and resilience rather than rebellion.

Integrative Perspective

The intercorrelations among motivation, aggression, coping, and body esteem suggest that tattooing operates as a psychologically adaptive process linking self-determination with emotional integration. Tattoos function as embodied narratives that unite external expression with internal healing, reaffirming the body as a medium of self-construction and agency (Pitts, 2003; Atkinson, 2003). Within the Indian context, where social conformity and collective identity remain influential, tattoos may enable individuals to balance traditional belonging with modern autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides meaningful insights into the psychological and cultural dimensions of tattooing among young adults in Rajasthan, India. The findings revealed that tattooed individuals exhibited significantly higher levels of body esteem (particularly in the attribution domain), stronger intrinsic and identified motivation, and higher physical and verbal aggression scores interpreted as assertiveness and self-affirmation rather than hostility. Additionally, tattooed participants reported lower trauma scores, indicating that tattooing may serve as a coping mechanism and a symbol of resilience rather than psychological distress.

No significant differences were found in conformity, coping mechanisms, or personality traits between tattooed and non-tattooed groups, suggesting that tattooed individuals are equally well-adjusted and socially integrated. The intercorrelations among motivation, body esteem, aggression, and coping reflect that tattooing functions as an adaptive process of emotional regulation, self-expression, and meaning-making.

Qualitative analyses further emphasized that tattoos often represent empowerment, healing, and self-definition, supporting the view that tattooing acts as a narrative tool through which individuals reclaim agency over their bodies and experiences.

Overall, this study highlights that in the evolving Indian sociocultural landscape, tattooing has transitioned from a stigmatized practice to a psychologically adaptive and culturally expressive form of self-narration. Tattoos in this context symbolize autonomy, emotional resilience, and identity integration, challenging outdated stereotypes of deviance and underscoring the role of body art as a legitimate avenue for psychological well-being and personal growth.

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