

## **ABSTRACT**

FOULKE, MEREDITH CLAIRE. Speaking of Ink: What Motivates Young Adults to Disclose Their Tattoos. (Under the direction of Dr. Lynsey Romo).

Although tattoos provide ways for people to create an identity and communicate with the public and getting inked has become more mainstream, tattoos are predominantly viewed negatively. Young adults (aged 18 -24) with tattoos are at a particular disadvantage of being heavily stigmatized, because the rate that they are getting tattoos and the number of tattoos they have is rising faster than other age groups. Using Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002) as a theoretical framework, this study examines what motives young adults to reveal or conceal that they have a tattoo. This study found that young adults are aware of the repercussions that tattoo stigma has on perceived perceptions from others and carefully managed their privacy depending on whether they believed revealing they had a tattoo was risky or not. Young adults verbally revealed their tattoo status when they perceived disclosing helped to develop their personal identity and helped to build relationships. However, young adults concealed having tattoos when they feared disclosing could harm their professional identity and/or result in judgement from their family and friends. This research provides unique insight into the communication boundary management of young adults with tattoos.

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Speaking of Ink: What Motivates Young Adults to Disclose Their Tattoos

by  
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## Introduction

The practice of tattooing has a long history, with the earliest documentation dating back to early Mesopotamian times (Ditchey, 2017). Many of those early documents portray tattoos in a negative light. During Egyptian times tattoos were common among prostitutes as tattooing was seen as way to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (Lineberry, 2007). The purpose of tattoos transformed during Greek and Roman times with tattoos signifying religious groups or social status (Lineberry, 2007). However, in A.D 306 - 373, Emperor Constantine banned tattoos because it was believed to be an act against God to mark one's skin (Lineberry, 2007; Pesapane, Nazzaro, Gianotti & Coggi, 2014) and leading up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century tattoos were associated with gang members and criminals (DeMello & Rubin, 2000). Getting a tattoo was associated with outgroup members (DeMello & Rubin, 2000).

Lately tattoos have become a way for people, particularly for young adults, ages 18-24, to communicate and express themselves (Dickson, Dukes, Smith, & Strapko, 2015; Forbes, 2001; Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999). Tattoos can enable the wearer to disclose, to a certain extent, a portion of their personality and can increase a person's perceived uniqueness and self-esteem (Owen, Armstrong, Koch & Roberts, 2013; Swami et. al., 2015). However, today the stigma around tattoos still exists. People with tattoos are believed to be more sexually permissive (Armstrong & Owen, 2005; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong & Owen, 2005; Swami & Furnham, 2007), are perceived to have alcohol and drug addiction tendencies (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, Owen, 2010), and be more aggressive and involved in deviant behavior (Koch et. al., 2010). Despite the stigma, tattoos are on the rise, especially among young adults with 35% of 18-24-year olds having at least one tattoo in 2015 (Tattoo Takeover, 2016). Indeed, in the next decade,

it is estimated that 40% of the population will have a tattoo (Swami, 2011) an increase of 20% over today's tattooed population.

It is important to understand how young adults in particular manage the stigma that can result from disclosure of their tattoos, as the potential stigma they may encounter may negatively affect their reputation or future careers. Thus, the goal of this study is to understand what motivates young adults to reveal or conceal that they have a tattoo(s). I start by reviewing the history of tattoos and the transition to its association today as a stigma. Then I discuss the paper's theoretical framework of Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002). Using that framework, I provide an in-depth explanation of the results of my research and discuss the implications of my findings.

### **Tattoo Stigma**

Stigma, as defined by Goffman (1963), is a mark of disgrace. That mark of disgrace is associated with particular characteristics (Stigma, n.d.). For visible tattoos, the stigma can be lifelong, as the process of tattooing is permanently marking one's skin with ink. Furthermore, people are making the conscious decision to get tattooed based on personal motivations (Dickson et. al., 2015) which could make other people view that choice as a character flaw (Smith, 2007).

Interestingly, in Greek times, tattooing was called "stigmata" (Jones, 1987; Lineberry, 2007) and its purpose was passed down as a way to easily classify a person with the tattoo as "belonging" to either a religious sect or criminal background (Lineberry, 2007). Previous research suggests that discrimination and stigmas are still associated with tattooing (Martin & Dula, 2010). Today, a tattoo is stigmatized as a precursor or factor leading to deviant behavior (Koch et. at., 2005). When it comes to deviant behavior associated with tattoos, people perceive individuals to be more engaged in sexual activity, drug and alcohol abuse, and impulsive and

aggressive behavior (Forbes, 2001; Koch et al., 2005; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). It is reported that men and women with tattoos scored higher on showing tendencies to be rebellious and breaking away from societal norms when feeling constrained (Manuel and Sheehan, 2007). In this way, inking oneself can be perceived to be an act of defiance to stand out.

Young adults are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to the threat of tattoo stigma, because their lives are full of transitions. College students tend to be perceived as more rebellious and having a tattoo heightens that perception (Koch et. al., 2010). As previous literature claims that tattoos symbolized a profession as a prostitute in Egyptian times (Lineberry, 2007), that assumption of sexual behavior has carried over to people today with tattoos. Students with tattoos are more engaged in sexual activity with “96.1% having been sexually active compared to 72.4% of the non-tattooed men, and 94.6% of tattooed women had been sexually active compared to 68.1% of the non-tattooed women” (Koch et. al., 2005, p. 888). While research has found differences in tattooed persons and non-tattooed persons, it is not significant enough to point at tattooed individuals as being more deviant with their sexuality. However, the taboo history and stigma surrounding tattoos is still held by the majority of the population today, especially in professional environments.

### **Tattoos and a Professional Identity**

Organizations are not immune from the cultural stigma that tattoos carry. Consequently, young adults need to consider their professional identity when revealing that they have a tattoo (Lucas, 2017). Research on tattoo perception comparing pictures of people with tattoos and without tattoos found, “having a tattoo hinders interpersonal perceptions ... and obtaining a tattoo may lead to one being judged less positively than would be the case without a tattoo” (Resenhoeft, Vila and Wiseman’s, 2008, p. 595). Organizations are also known to judge potential

employees who have tattoos less favorably and that judgement is known as *aesthetic labor* or employing “people with certain capacities and physical attributes that favorably appeal to customers visual or aural sense” (Timming, et. Al., 2015, p. 137). Recommendations on how to handle having a tattoo in the workplace include, staying away from explicit tattoos, considering the extent of the tattoo, and keeping it off the face or neck (Lucas, 2017).

Hiring personnel based on whether they have a tattoo is not illegal or an act of discrimination, unless the tattoo relates to the tattoo wearer being a part of a protected class (Elzwing & Peeples, 2011). Tattoos fit under a dress code policy and organizations have the right to enforce those policies within the workplace. People have reported wearing full sleeves throughout the year to cover up their tattoos and that clients and other employees looked down upon their tattooed co-workers (Sanghani, 2016). According to an article in *Forbes* magazine on business “no-no’s”, Geico Insurance and the United Postal Service are just a few examples of organizations that have a tattoo policy in place (Faw, 2011).

Millennials are aware of how tattoo stigma can affect their professionalism. Research has found that 95.2% of participants with tattoos would cover up for a job interview and 86% of respondents indicated that they felt tattooed people would have a harder time getting a job (Folz, 2014). Knowing that tattoos can hinder one's ability to get a job, young adults have to be particularly careful of their disclosure of tattoos with it comes to professional environments. However, it is unclear how young adults manage their verbal communication of having a stigmatized characteristic that can affect employment opportunities. Looking at the disclosure through a communication lens provides an opportunity to better understand *why* young adults reveal or conceal they have a tattoo in the face of this stigma.

## **Communication Privacy Management**

Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002) provides a valuable framework for understanding how young adults negotiate disclosure of their tattoos, as CPM has been widely applied to disclosure of stigmatized traits (Hammons, 2012; Romo, 2017). CPM identifies how people create boundaries around their personal information based on the risks and rewards they perceive to be associated with sharing that personal information (Petronio, 2002; Smith & Brunner, 2017). Private information is key to this theory, which assumes that people own their personal information and determine whether to reveal it, thus enabling them to have more closed or more open boundaries around their personal information (Petronio, 2002).

People manage metaphorical boundaries about their personal information based on a rule-based management system that includes weighing the risks and rewards of disclosure (Petronio, 2002). When people are developing rules for disclosing information they determine what information can be co-owned based on their risk-benefit ratio and those rules can vary in openness and closedness depending on how much, if at all, the owner reveals (Petronio, 2002). Determining control and ownership is a meticulous process, because of the control that is lost when revealing and the information becomes co-owned (Petronio, 2002). Smith (2007) suggests that stigmatized people developed coping strategies when it comes to ownership of their information - in many cases denying their stigmatized trait or concealing all together. A tattoo can be considered personal information, which young adults need to determine whether to verbally reveal or conceal. However, privacy boundaries around stigmatized information tend to be more highly regulated because of the higher potential for negative evaluations (Romo, 2016; Smith, 2007; Timming et. al., 2017)

Millennials have many boundaries that they have to negotiate, whether it be regarding professionalism or the perceptions established by friends and family about tattoos (Foltz, 2014). Research on college students' management of their stigmatized identity as a nondrinker found that students took great care in managing who they granted access to as a co-owner of that information, out of fear that they would be seen as abnormal and excluded from social activities (Romo, 2012). The nondrinker students managed who they shared and co-owned that information with through specific rule-based management systems (Romo, 2012; Petronio, 2002). College students revealed their identity as a nondrinker when they were able to communicate it as a positive trait and disclose in a way that saved the drinker's face and their own face (Romo, 2012).

CPM also states that concealing can result from a perception that the risks are greater than the rewards. Research on emerging adults (ages 18-25) revealing private information to their parents showed the complexity in the decision-making process of weighing the risks and rewards (Hammonds, 2015). The emerging adults evaluated the quality of the relationship heavily and concealed when the relationship with the parent was positive for fear of damaging the positive identity with the parent and taking too much of a relational risk (Hammonds, 2015). Similarly, a *marked* or stigmatized person has to negotiate their disclosure of their stigma based on the ingroup member's perception (Smith, 2007). Fear of being outed or rejected by the community forces stigmatized people to conceal their personal information (Smith, 2007) and shows that participants are more careful about weighing the risks and rewards when it comes to stigmatized information (Blockmans, 2015; Romo, 2012; Romo, 2016).

Because the stigma of tattoos can have negative repercussions on one's identity (Resenhoeft et. al., 2008) but tattoos can represent a huge part of a young adult's personality and

lived experiences (Dickson, et. a., 2015) it is important to understand the process that young adults go through in determining whether to verbally disclose their tattooed status. Since young adults have the highest rate of getting tattoos, despite the stigma, in this study I seek to explore their disclosure process. People are more likely to get inked if friends and family are inked (Dickson, Dukes, Smith & Strapko, 2014) and a young adult may be willing to disclose information about their tattoos if they perceive the rewards to outweigh the risks. Using CPM as a theoretical framework, the following questions about how young adults negotiate disclosure of their tattoos are proposed:

RQ1: What motivates young adults to disclose their tattoo(s) to others?

RQ2: What motivates young adults to not disclose their tattoo(s) to others?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

In order to uncover how young adults determine whether to reveal or conceal their tattoos, 25 students participated in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Participants ranged from 19 to 25 years old. The mean age of the participants was 21.36 and the median age was 21 years old. Sixty-eight percent ( $n = 17$ ) of the participants were female and 32% ( $n = 8$ ) were male. 75% ( $n = 19$ ) of the participants identified themselves as white/Caucasian, 12% ( $n = 3$ ) identified themselves as biracial, 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified themselves as African American, 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified themselves as Asian, and 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified themselves as Native American. Participants' number of tattoos ranged from one tattoo to seven tattoos, with the average participant having 2.24 tattoos.

## Procedure

After Institutional Review Board approval was received, I recruited participants through Facebook posts, an announcement in college class, and via snowball sampling to encourage students to participate. In order to participate, students had to be attending or be a recent graduate (within six months of the date they graduated) of a large Southeastern university, had at least one tattoo and be at least 18 years old. Compensation in the form of a \$5 Target gift card was given to each participant after the interview courtesy of university funds. Participants were interviewed at a public location of their choice. Due to the focused nature of the interview questions, the interviews averaged just under 21 minutes. After each participant understood that their identity would remain confidential and signed the consent forms, I asked them to choose a pseudonym to maintain his or her anonymity. Furthermore, participants were told that they could skip questions or stop the interview at any point.

I asked a variety of questions about the participants' experiences with tattoos, the communication and perceptions around their tattoos, and how they believed other people viewed tattoos. Consistent with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, an initial set of questions were determined prior to the interviews, but additional questions were asked based on the interviewees' answers to reflect their experiences (Tracy, 2013). Saturation in responses was reached when the participants' information did not yield new insights. Thus, I concluded the interviews.

Every interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis, from an etic coding perspective (Peterson, 2017). I used CPM (Petronio, 2002) as a guide to understand how the participant's responses applied to the existing theory (Peterson, 2017). I read through each transcribed interview and noted different themes for each participant, starting the initial

primary-coding cycle (Tracy, 2013). After reading through the initial interviews, I went through again and noted similarities among the participant's responses regarding their responses on revealing or concealing personal information about their tattoos. Based on the first two readings of the transcripts, categories were created to code the transcripts, narrowing down and organizing the data (Peterson, 2017). Following the categories, I created a codebook to help determine which responses from participants belonged in the different categories (Tracy, 2013). Those categories focused on the stigma that participants perceived to be associated with tattoos, moments that participants revealed their tattoos and to whom they revealed their tattoos, moments that participants said that they would not disclose information about their tattoos, and their perception of tattoos in the workplace. After the codebook was created, I went back through the interviews a third time and coded exemplars into different categories based on the first two readings and narrowed the data down further. The codebook and research question were consulted while each transcript was coded in order to stay true to the overall research goal (Tracy, 2013). Following the coding of each transcript, I created a list of particular responses that would be examples used throughout the results and discussion of the research paper, known as in vivo coding (Peterson, 2017). Last, I engaged in member checking to help determine the validity of the findings (Tracy, 2010). Of the 16 people for whom I had contact information, 5 (31%) responded that their experiences aligned with the themes found.

## **Results**

The goal of this study was to explore young adults' verbal disclosure of their tattoos and specifically how they negotiated whether to reveal or conceal their tattoo. I detailed the results below.

## **Being Tattooed as Stigmatized**

Consistent with existing literature (Martin & Dula, 2010; Dickson et. al., 2013) this study revealed that a stigma is indeed associated with tattoos. Previous research indicates that tattooed persons are seen as promiscuous, unintelligent, reckless and associated with violence and drugs, all things considered to be deviant behavior (Koch et. at., 2005). Participants in the current investigation reported there was a stigma with tattoos and an overwhelming majority of participants experienced some moment of feeling stigmatized for having a tattoo. When asked about the general perception of tattoos, Anna, 24, reported that society had a negative attitude and view of people with tattoos and that people who have tattoos were stereotyped. Anna emphasized the stigma associated with having tattoos explaining:

I guess just society, like when you're asking what type of people get tattoos, you know, you usually think of somebody like – you know- a gangster or somebody like a hard person. So, they might think like, "Oh, this person with tattoos they might be into dangerous stuff or dangerous situations and risk taking." So definitely society based, even though anybody can get a tattoo. You don't have to be of a certain category. But you definitely get put into a category if people see a tattoo.

Multiple participants expressed that the perception of tattoos related heavily to a having a rebellious personality, consistent with existing literature on the types of stigma associated with tattoos (Swami et. al., 2015). Participants felt people with tattoos were seen, by society, as belonging to "rough" backgrounds and making reckless decisions. Thomas, 22, felt that "the stigma is that you would kind of have generally like a rougher background, a rougher childhood and be more likely to make dangerous or foolish choices." Similarly, Andrew, 22, described tattoos as "a criminal type of stereotype or something because I mean so many people who have

been in prison or something come out with prison tattoos and I think most people recognize people who've been in trouble with tattoos." One participant, Edgar, 22, felt that just the topic of tattoos was stigmatized and explained that tattoos were "taboo."

Nancy, 21, recalled a particularly negative moment about revealing her tattoo to a customer when she was a waitress. As Nancy explained, a regular customer at the restaurant noticed she wasn't waitressing the previous night and asked her whereabouts. When Nancy responded that she was getting a tattoo his demeanor changed and said "guys aren't going to want to take me home to their mothers" because she had tattoos.

CPM posits that people manage their private information (having a tattoo) through the creation of a privacy management process. Through this management process, participants determined when they revealed or concealed having a tattoo to others. Participants created a set of boundaries that determined what context and to whom they disclosed their personal information by evaluating the risks and rewards that occurred when revealing. In light of stigma and its effect on young adults and their perception in society, it is important to look at how young adults managed disclosure about having a tattoo and how they managed the stigma associated with tattoos. Framed by CPM, the results found that young adults revealed when the disclosure was used as a way to bond or to create and maintain a positive identity and concealed when they felt the risks were too great with regards to their professional identity and relationship with family and friends.

### **Disclosure Theme: What Motivates Young Adults to Disclose their Tattoo(s) to Others**

Addressing the first research question, two themes emerged for participants' disclosure of having a tattoo: (1) Being able to bond with someone else by conversing about their tattoo was

more rewarding than concealing, and (2) Being true to one's identity was more important for young adults than the risks of being stigmatized and motivated them to reveal having a tattoo.

**Disclosure subtheme 1: Disclosure as bonding.** When participants weighed the risks and rewards of revealing they had a tattoo, many participants expressed that the benefit of having the ability to talk about their tattoo with someone else and create a shared bond of tattoos outweighed the potential stigma risk. The criteria of bonding was a motivation for them to reveal their tattooed status. Many participants were able to start a conversation with new people, who they would never have talked to otherwise, when they opened up about their tattoos. "It's a nice little conversation starter. If anything, they have the initial question of 'hey what is that?'" said James, 21. CPM posits that the owner determines when to reveal based on the rewards associated with making private information public (Petronio, 2002). Participants felt rewarded when they could use their tattoos to open conversation around topics that were close to themselves, thus increasing disclosure. James, 21 even went on to say that the purpose of getting a tattoo was to talk about it and disclose information about it in conversations; "I mean, that's the reason I got it in the first place. It's because you want to talk about it." In accordance with previous research, people were getting inked to have a physical communicative tool (DeMello & Rubin, 2000) and the process of getting a tattoo was precisely thought out (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong & Owen, 2015). CPM asserts that disclosure of private information can increase social validation by reinforcing values and beliefs when disclosing them with others. By using tattoos as a conversation starter, participants were able to connect with others and use the communication about their tattoos to discuss personal values and beliefs that they held.

Mark, 24, used tattoos to help him share his religion. He explained that "it's the stories the biblical stories standpoints I have behind them. They give me chance to show my testimony

with strangers ... it makes it easier for me share the word of God of people.” He felt that by disclosing his religious body art, he could show his own personal standpoint and connect that with people who might not otherwise come in contact with religion.

Similarly, Emma, 20, used her tattoos to start the discussion and find similarities with other people.

I’ve had a lot of good conversations come out of it. Like – just – um “Oh you have a tattoo? Me too.” And getting to hear people’s stories and what’s personal to them or what made them want this so much to be on their body forever, you know? A lot of good stories have come out of it. Or like – some of my favorites are like “Oh I got this in memory of someone that like passed.” Like I think it’s really a cool way to have that human connection. Um, or because they are related to my faith, I’ve had like a few interesting conversations with people that are like “Oh, I’m really big into my faith too” or “I don’t much about, what can you tell me?” or “I don’t believe in God and here’s why. Let’s have a discussion about it.” Like I just – it’s not often that it happens, but when it does it’s memorable and I think that’s kind of cool.

This was consistent with CPM’s framework for understanding motivations for the rule development of risks and rewards. Participants felt that a tattoo provided an opportunity for people to bond with others and just as Mark and Emma were motivated to talk about their tattoos based on social validation, others felt that disclosing information about their tattoos increased relationship development (Petronio, 2002).

Consistent with CPM, relationship development was considered when weighing the risks and rewards of disclosure (Petronio, 2002). In this study, participants perceived disclosing their

tattoos to be rewarding and were motivated to reveal as a way to help build relationships. Lacy, 21, felt that having a tattoo helped her to open with others, specifically other people with tattoos.

I think it's a cool way you can bond with people really fast, if you both have tattoos.

Like, I went to this workshop for a job and I had and we had to find things we had in common with people and all the people in my group had tattoos and so we all kind of like, bonded over that. It's like a common background.

Similar to the participants who revealed when they perceived the benefits outweighed the risks, other participants balanced the risks and rewards but would not disclose unless directly asked by others. Leanna, 22, used her tattoos to increase disclosure, but let the other person lead the conversation about her tattoos.

I usually let them ask the questions because a lot of people go straight for the "what does that mean" kind of thing and I really don't think that tattoos have to have a meaning. I think that if you think something's pretty then that's meaning enough to get it. So, I usually just let them decide what they want to ask about.

Participants said that they would reveal that they had a tattoo when asked directly and did not offer up that information right away. Laura, 19, said, "I mean if someone asks me if I have a tattoo or anything I'll talk about it it's not really a secret." Betsy, 19, was more direct in not offering information about her tattoo, but still mentioned that she was willing to reveal: "If people ask—I mean, I'm not usually like, hey I have a tattoo, but like, if people ask me about it, I'll be sure to like, try and give them the information they're looking for."

Similar to literature on people's willingness to get a tattoo based on knowledge that friends and families had one (Dickson et. al., 2013), it was common for participants to consider if the other person had a tattoo or not before revealing. When it came to evaluating the risks and

rewards associated with disclosure of their tattoos, participants were more preoccupied with identifying if the other had a tattoo. They would perceive more rewards out of the conversation by disclosing to a person with tattoos than a non-tattooed person. Nancy, 21, highlighted this strategy for revealing by explaining that disclosing to people with tattoos was easier. When asked about why there was an ease of disclosing to someone with tattoos, she responded, “probably it's a common experience, and they know what I'm talking about.”

**Disclosure subtheme 2: Tattoos as identity creation and management.** Previous research found that young adults got tattoos for a variety of reasons, with the main focus on tattoos serving as a symbolic meaning-making function (Dickson et. al., 2015). As is the case with this study, participants managed their motivations to reveal based on their perceptions of disclosure helping to create or maintain their identities. As previously mentioned, participants acknowledged that stigma held by the greater society, but felt that it was more rewarding to reveal that they had a tattoo than to conceal.

Many participants used tattoos as empowerment through an expression of their personality and things that were important in their lives. Beck, 22, talked about his love for Star Wars and how the movies and world of Star Wars was a big part of his own life. By having a tattoo reflecting his love for Star Wars, Beck said “my two tattoos tell you how nerdy I am on the inside and the outside.” Beck was able to disclose a part of his personality through the verbal revealment of his tattoos. Sarah, 21, said that tattoos communicated empowerment and felt they allowed her and others to share their experiences. “I think they just are more expressive of how they feel and the things that they’ve been through and that’s just how they want to tell their story.” Consistent with CPM and previous research, these participants were motivated to seek

out opportunities to reveal having a tattoo as a way to express their identity (Dickson et. al., 2015; Petronio, 2002).

In addition to revealing their personality, participants expressed that revealing they had a tattoo increased their feelings of empowerment. Previous research (Dickson et. al., 2015) and participants acknowledged that the process of getting a tattoo can be potentially dangerous to one's health, regarding the cleanliness of the tattoo parlor and risk for infections. It also has the potential to contribute to the stigma of being reckless, since people get tattoos despite the risk (Owen et. al., 2013). However, this study found that although participants were conscious of that health risk and stigma, they felt that it gave them a sense of empowerment by disclosing.

Citing her own outgoing personality when describing her motivations to reveal her tattoo, Lacy, 21, felt that revealing she had a tattoo helped her to create a "bad-ass" personality. She explained, "I kind of think it's empowering, because you're like, yeah the stigma tells you it's bad ass, it makes you feel badass, so that's kind of cool." Similarly, Emma, 20, felt that by disclosing her tattoo status she was able to stand out among her peers with tattoos and explained "that's memorable or like helps you look tough or certain things."

In conjunction with CPM, these interviewees did not feel that the stigma was a risk, rather a reward that boosted their overall being. In revealing, the participants showed the reward of expressing their tattoos outweighed the risks. Similarly, Jennifer, 19, used her tattoos as a way to communicate her strength by embracing the risk-taking stigma. "For like me like just I think it's most – very personally rewarding knowing that I went to that risk to like, endure that pain." Participants disclosure of tattoos helped to create an empowered and tough identity and participants perceived this to be a highly sought-after reward for revealing.

Through disclosure, tattoos provide a basic framework for people to start a conversation and create and maintain their identities. However, just as participants felt that there were motivations for revealing, participants noted motivations for not disclosing that they had a tattoo.

### **Non-disclosure Theme: What Motivates Young Adults to Not Disclose their Tattoo(s) to Others**

While many participants felt that revealing provided a lot of opportunities and advantages, many participants still felt that the stigma associated with tattoos was more impactful on their professional life and relationships with their family and friends. Because they perceive there to be greater risks, participants were not willing to reveal.

**Non-disclosure subtheme 1: Concealing to maintain a positive professional reputation.** Many participants identified particular moments when revealing a tattoo was too risky. Participants felt that one of the main rules for not revealing was the workplace environment because they felt that having a tattoo in the workforce hurt their chances for getting a dream job and put their professional reputation at risk. This is consistent with previous literature about tattoo disclosure in the workplace (Timming et. al., 2015).

Revealing or concealing is a personal decision and CPM posits that the way people acquire rules in concealing come from previous socialization and experiences. Emma identified that having a tattoo had potential repercussions in her professional identity and that stemmed from previous knowledge of the tattoo stigma in professional workplace environments. Some participants acknowledged that first impressions are key in securing their “dream job” but having a tattoo did not benefit their first impression. Steve, 21 explained:

Some environments where as soon as that is seen, you kind of have an uphill battle to fight back and show people that you're more professional than you look. So, I think that

having that ability at least for the first impression be able to kind of make a clean slate first impression is important.

Emma and Steve both identified that concealing their tattoos in the workplace had more rewards, both short-term and long-term.

As previous research on tattoos in the workplace discusses, having a tattoo can be considered a part of the dress code and monitored by organizations. Many participants noted that this organizational rule resulted in the creation of boundaries limiting their revealment, because they perceived disclosure harmful to future jobs. “It would affect my appearance based off of that” said Isabella, 20, when asked about her tattoo being disclosed in a professional environment. In this way, participants understood the potential effects that tattoos had on their first impression and success in achieving their dream job. Nicole, 21 specifically noted that she created a rule about not disclosing in professional environments because it has been articulated through society the risks revealing has in a professional environment. Nicole explained:

For jobs, professional looking at it. I want to be able to cover it up when I need to. I understand that some jobs just don’t appreciate tattoos. For me, I feel like it’s a personal, I mean it’s just personal and if you want to show them, show them. But a lot of places don’t want them being shown.

In this way, concealing is not about withholding information, but the physical act of covering up one’s tattoo.

According to Smith and Brunner’s (2017) research on disclosure of personal information in the workplace, people maintain boundaries around their private information based on knowledge of organizational culture. In this study, participants are basing their concealment of tattoos on the stigma that society holds about tattoos and its effects in the workplace. Luna, 22,

explained that her lack of knowledge about an organization's tattoo policy prior to an interview was heavily considered and resulted in making the conscience decision to conceal in order to maintain a positive professional identity.

I didn't disclose to anybody that I had a tattoo just in case. Just in case like I don't agree with if people having a tattoo makes you less of an employee, but just in case you know I really wanted this job, so I was like I'll reveal it when I find out if there's a tattoo policy or not or if there's like I guess older people because I didn't know what I was going into walking into there.

That idea of first impressions was maintained through many of the participant's interviews and is highlighted in literature about the effects of stigma on perceptions of people (Resenhoft et. al., 2008).

Betsy, 19, worked at a bank and summed up the stigma of tattoos in the workplace saying, "It was kind of an unwritten rule" when it came to concealing tattoos both physically and verbally. However, professional workplaces were not the only scenarios that participants expressed hesitation about revealing their tattoos.

**Non-disclosure subtheme 2: Concealing to avoid judgement from family and friends.** Another finding that was uncovered came from participants wanting to preserve their identity with family and friends. This is consistent with previous literature that found that emerging adults concealed private information when they perceived a high-quality relationship and revealing the private information would be a risk to that relationship (Hammonds, 2015). Many participants anticipated stigma based off previous conversations they had with family and friends about tattoos prior to receiving the tattoo, so they chose not to reveal. Sarah, 21, talked about previous discussions with her grandfather about tattoos that made her nervous to disclose

having one. She explained that “He’s just kind of old school, by the bible, like ‘Your body’s a temple, don’t modify it. It’s perfect the way it is.’ He was kind of giving us a lesson on that on why he thought we shouldn’t do it.” Similarly, Lacy, 21, talked about how her stepmom outwardly said that “tattoos are trashy.” Participants had experiences with family and friends about the stigma associated with tattoos and assumed they will be evaluated negatively, leading them to conceal having tattoos. CPM posits that stigma risks are a part of managing personal information and lead people to concealing information.

The findings indicate that consistent with the permeable boundaries of CPM (Petronio, 2002) some participants would conceal initially to save face with their family and friends but reveal later when they perceived it is to be less risky. Emma, 20, feared telling her mom, because she was afraid of the repercussions that it would have on her mom’s perception of her - “I told my mom after I got my first one. I told her I wanted to get one, but I told her after the fact, because I didn’t want her to be upset”. Emma, along with other participants, felt that their families’ negative perceptions of tattoo made it riskier to reveal than to conceal. “I did not tell my dad for about three months after I got it, just because I knew he wasn’t going to like it. And, he’s probably the biggest reason why I didn’t get it sooner” said Isabella, 20. Isabella and Emma felt that it was harder to tell family members because they were afraid of the emotional repercussions if their family members found out.

Some participants never revealed to their family members. Jennifer, 19, said she got a very tiny tattoo and out of her fear for her mother’s reaction has yet to tell; “So that was kind of the motivations why ... one huge reason is because like my mom would actually kill me. I’m going to wait a couple years.” However, avoiding an emotional outburst was not the only reason that participants concealed their tattoo status.

Jennifer, 19 expressed on multiple times that the fear of being judged resulted in her critically thinking about the level of trust she had with someone before she would reveal.

Like having that debate of like “do I want to tell this friend, or do I want to wait and like what level of friendship did we have?” Because like – I don’t know, like I was afraid of like almost getting mocked. They’re like “what is that.” Just like people that like I trust enough that I know they would understand. So that made me like kind of evaluate like friendships that I had.

The findings showed that participants did not reveal for fear of being judged negatively.

Reputation among friends and family is a huge component for participants choice to conceal.

Tattoo stigma is not only prevalent in the workforce, but my findings uncovered that this stigma and fear of a spoiled reputation is seen in relationships with friends and family.

### **Discussion**

Petronio’s (2002) privacy management theory argues that people strategically negotiate the metaphorical boundaries around their personal information and weigh the risks and rewards in the face of potential stigma. Consistent with CPM, the results of this study uncover that young adults with tattoos closely monitor and carefully manage the boundaries around disclosing verbally their own tattoos. With reference to when young adults reveal that they have a tattoo (RQ1), two themes emerged: disclosure as bonding and revealing having a tattoo as identity creation and management. With regards to when young adults conceal having a tattoo (RQ2), two themes emerged: concealing to maintain a positive professional identity and concealing to avoid judgement from family and friends.

CPM provides a basic foundation for understanding the risk and reward criteria that is associated with verbal disclosure. What makes this study unique is that it factors in the many

transitions young adults are experiencing while moving into the professional world and making a good name for themselves, as well as being true to their identity and maintaining a positive relationship with the important people in their lives. Consistent with literature (Folz, 2014), results show that young adults were aware of the tattoo stigma and take that into consideration when weighing the risks and rewards. However, the findings of the present study uncover that despite the stigma young adults willingly reveal their tattoo status when the rewards attribute to strengthening their personal identity and perceive to result in sparking a conversation or add to an existing relationship. This finding coincides with research about how inking oneself provides an outlet for people to communicate their emotions (Owen et. al., 2013). With young adults, having a tattoo can be a restorative process, meaning there is a link between emotional well-being and tattoos (Koch et. al., 2015). The study's results show that the process of revealing elevate that restorative process and allow tattoo wearers to create larger outlet for their emotions by engaging and giving that information about their tattoos to co-owners (Petronio, 2002).

This study shows that young adults create very solid boundaries around concealing when the risk of disclosure has an effect on their professional identity or has the potential to result in judgment from family and friends. Participants did not reveal because they feel that it would have an effect on their character evaluation by future employers. As previously discussed, since tattooed people are choosing to ink themselves and take on the stigmatized characteristic that act is seen as form of deviance and looked down upon, especially in the workplace (Timming et. al., 2015). Participants in this study express that the fear of being negatively evaluated or losing a potential job based on their tattoo was a risk that limits their disclosure. Furthermore, participants need to better understand the organization's culture and perception of tattoos before talking about their tattoo. Since participants consider the risks associated with tattoos stigma before

revealing, this finding is consistent with CPM and previous literature (Smith & Brunner, 2017; Timming et. al., 2015).

Similarly, the study found that young adults consider judgment from family and friends as a major risk. Young adults examine previous discussions with family and friends about tattoos and evaluate their communication about tattoos. Through that evaluation, young adults are better able to understand if disclosure would result in judgement and if so, choose to conceal their tattoo status. This management allows participants the opportunity to consider the relational risks associated with revealing and save themselves from being perceived negatively by those closest to them, consistent with previous literature (Hammonds, 2015; Smith, 2007). These findings along with previous research provides a great foundation to change the discourse around tattoos, by showing that people with tattoos care and work to maintain positive and professional identities, unlike the stereotypes that are attached to tattoos.

### **Practical Applications**

This study provides several unique contributions to communication about stigmatized traits. The first contribution is that it provides insight into how young adults perceive the stigma of tattoos and why they ink themselves despite the stigma. Furthermore, it provides a basic understanding into how young adults manage communication boundaries around disclosure and what risks are more powerful in dissuading them from revealing. These findings help to debunk the stereotypes around tattoos and show that people are careful about revealing - which is in sharp contrast to the common stereotypes about people with tattoos. The findings supplemented with research that tattooed personnel are no different than non-tattooed personnel (Forbes, 2001; Swami, Gaughan, Tran, Stieger & Voracek, 2015), can provide a base for changing workplace policies around tattoos.

Secondly, the implications in this study highlight, in conjunction with previous research on tattoo stigma, many of the pressures and concerns that young adults face with managing disclosure about their tattoos. While young adults are experiencing and navigating many social pressures, the process of getting a tattoo can be a restorative process to help them through those pressure points and this research shows that sharing their stories about tattoos is empowering and useful.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study provides insight into the way that young adults manage their tattooed identity this study cannot not be applied to all young adults and their disclosure management. The sample size is not large enough to generalize to the entire population and does not take into account differences that could come about over different geographic locations. This study was conducted through interviews of college students or recent college and further research needs to be conducted to understand how young adults more than six months removed from college disclose their tattooed identity.

Additionally, only students with tattoos were interviewed for this study. Conducting research on young adults with and young adults without tattoos can provide a better understanding how the stigma can affect the disclosure of having a tattoo. This study can also provide insight on how people without tattoos perceive the stigma and whether their non-tattoo status has any bearing on their interactions with people with tattoos. Finally, this study did not look at the nonverbal disclosure process in young adults. Since tattoos are a physical mark on the body, research needs to explore the nonverbal process of revealing or concealing and how that process plays a larger role in disclosure and perceptions of tattoos. Looking at the nonverbal

disclosure process can provide insight on unique environments, rather than young adults as a whole.

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