

An Exploration of Body Art in Retail Advertising

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This study will examine whether body art has an impact on clothing perceptions in retail advertising. The study included two focus groups – Millennials and Baby Boomers and an online questionnaire, matched pairs of models with and without tattoos over a four-month period. We assert that the type of body art models display may limit their roles. Further, the hypothesis examined whether body art may take away from the actual clothing or whether the artwork could enhance the clothing. The question then becomes, will Millennials be influenced or impacted by models with tattoos in a way different from prior generations?

INTRODUCTION

For this study, we will define an attractive model to be one where there is a perceived symmetry whether the person is obese or thin, their body should be in balanced proportions. The study is purposeful in moving away from the assertion that an attractive model is one with a muscular or thin body. In his book *Aesthetic measure*, George David Birkhoff (1933) a famous Harvard mathematician, believed that symmetry is a significant determining factor in an object's aesthetic appeal. His assertion was based on a mathematical formula he developed to measure the beauty and appeal of a work of art (Than, 2005). Than (2005) suggested that recent studies in biology have established that humans and animals are attuned to symmetry in each other to gauge beauty and health during mating selection (Than, 2005).

The objective of this study is to determine whether models with tattoos can be used by advertisers. If these models are used, should advertisers cover up the tattoos or are partially visible tattoos perfectly acceptable. If the tattoos are shown, will it distract from the clothing being advertised. In this study, several options were tested; partially revealed tattoos, entire tattoos are visible, tattoos are on different body parts. The models in this study would be shown with a tattoo and the same model would be shown without the tattoo in order to determine the preference of viewers. The premise is to determine if any tattoo, partially hidden or otherwise, will subconsciously destroy the rhythm and symmetry a person would respond to when looking at an attractive model resulting in a favorable selection from the respondent. In other words, the respondent would like or select a model without a tattoo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several studies done on the portrayal of body image in the media. One study asserted that the use of muscular and thin models in media can have a negative impact on someone who is suffering from a poor body image (Slater & Tiggemann (2006); Levine & Murnen, (2009). This study is focused on body symmetry and the impact tattoos have on breaking that symmetry.

Increasingly, since the 1950's fashion modeling has continued to depict thinner and more muscular fashion models (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Leit, Pope & Gray, 2001; Seifert, 2005; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann & Ahrens, 1992). The portrayal of a thin and muscular model in television programs, books, children's books and cartoons are often portrayed in a much more positive temperament, characteristic or trait, it's no wonder our perception of beauty is skewed. If these images are indoctrinated in children early in their development (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose & Thompson, 2004) and perpetuated in the media, it is clear that changing perception will then be challenging.

Tattoos are applied to the body through a rapid-injecting electrical device puncturing the skin with the intention of inserting colored pigment into the dermal layer of the skin to create a permanent marking. This form of body art is becoming increasingly popular but in prior years was perceived as a form of rebellion or deviance. Individuals with body art or tattoos were viewed as marginal groups in the society (Benson, 2000).

Tattoos have become very popular in Western cultures especially among the younger population and particularly the millennial generation. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2010), found that nearly four in ten have a tattoo and they were likely to have more than one. Eighteen percent (18%) of those that had tattoos had six or more, though 70% say they hide their tattoos beneath their clothing for privacy reasons (PewResearch, 2010). This increase in popularity is attributed to the need by individuals to be unique and their affiliation for music (Tiggemann, 2011).

Interestingly, although the millennial generation seemingly appear to be more accepting to body art, according to Dean, 2011, the younger generation expressed no confidence in people with visible tattoos and who were completing their taxes. It appeared that if a tax provider had a tattoo, the younger generation were likely to have less confidence in their ability to accurately complete their taxes. One can conclude that the presence of tattoos diminishes a person's credibility and ultimately competence. In fact, this generation considered tattoos inappropriate for people who were performing white-collar jobs or within the service industries. Yet our findings show that they increasingly favored tattoos, compared to the older generation.

While the fad runs its course, there are even television shows about applying or removing tattoos. There can be no doubt that this is an art form and can be considered quite beautiful in some cases. However, the scientific study of beauty has discovered universal aspects of beauty that apply to all civilizations and cultures. Among the things that make people attractive are consistent skin tone, symmetry in face and body, lack of blemishes. All three of these factors are potentially impacted by tattoos. From a distance, a tattoo can appear as a smudge or blemish and obviously alters skin tone. A closer photo may disclose that it is a tattoo but it can alter the rhythm of the body if the tattoo lacks symmetry which is the norm. However even a symmetrical tattoo such as a snake on each forearm can disrupt the rhythm of the body. If the snake tattoos are partially covered with clothing, that creates a subconscious edginess in the viewer which could be viewed as similar to looking at an incomplete painting.

There is some evidence that using tattooed women in advertising photos will have a negative impact on viewers and decrease the likelihood that individuals will view that photo for an extended period of time. In other words, we feel that less people will actually pay attention to that photo and if they do, will do so for a much shorter period of time. This research study will explore some aspects of this claim.

In Tiggemann and Hopkins, 2011 study, respondents were asked why they elected to have tattoos. The results were varied but the majority said that they obtained a tattoo because "*they celebrate an*

occasion or person,” “to express myself,” and “because they look good” (p.4). Furthermore, there was the indication that these individuals obtained tattoos to be unique.

It is also noteworthy to mention that human resource managers in other industries have been resistant to hiring people with tattoos (Swanger, 2006; Personnel Today, 2007). The question then becomes, would this pattern be transferred into the advertising and fashion industry as well.

The Methodology and Model

To conduct this study, we used both qualitative and quantitative methodology. The qualitative data methodology consisted of two focus group sessions; Baby Boomers (N=6) and Millennials (N=6). Results from the focus groups showed the millennial generation would be more accepting of tattoos in advertising than the Baby-Boomer generation. The Baby-Boomers, when asked about tattoos, reacted very negatively to the tattoo images. The consensus was that they felt that the younger generation would not be able to get jobs if they had tattoos. In fact, they viewed tattoos as a fad and that it would pass with time. Contrarily, overall the millennials were more accepting of tattoos in advertising, but one of the respondents who was a model stated that she got fired because of her tattoo. *“I just got fired from one of my agencies because I got a tattoo and they said if you want tattoos, that’s like a different market.”* She continued to say it depends on the style and what type of clothing was being advertised. The results of the focus group assisted our questionnaire design and also corroborated with the results of the online survey.

The online survey used one-hundred sets of photographs displayed side by side on a computer screen in five-second intervals. This simulated the approximate time it would take for the audience to see and recall an advertisement. The respondents had to choose either A or B, as it corresponds with the labeled image in the online survey. 77% of the photos were controls and the remaining 23% included tattooed models.

The online survey sample was collected using a convenience sampling method. It produced 300 responses but as with most online surveys, we found that only 233 responses from 70 cities could be used in our analysis.

The Findings

Without knowing this was a tattoo study and given 5-seconds to choose a photo, the 233 respondents picked the non-tattooed model 69% of the time.

The most immediate stratification of this finding was the different levels of acceptable by age group. There were five age categories, see below, but age 40 seemed to be the watershed. Those 40 years old and over, selected the tattoo photo 19% of the time and those under the age of 40 selected the tattoo photo 34% of the time.

We asked the online survey respondents to look at matched pairs of photos and to pick the photo that was most likely to increase the possibility of a purchase. We used two sets of 10 photos for this phase of the study. In only 4 of the 20 sets were the tattooed photo picked over 50% of the time. In the other 16 photos, the non-tattooed version was preferred and in some cases greatly skewed in favor of non-tattooed. We examined the 4 sets of photos that indicated a pleasant response to the image of the tattoo. There was a discernable pattern.

A handsome guy in a greenhouse, carrying produce, was preferred 52% of the time over the same photo without the tattoo. He had a tattoo on the upper arm. Our assumption is that it fit the scene. He clearly appeared more masculine in the photo with the tattoo. The second example is a muscular man with a shoulder tattoo. He is wearing a European style swimsuit and is toweling off his head. Once again, this appears to be something enhancing his masculinity in this scene since it was preferred 53% of the time. The third example, is once again, a handsome guy with a muscle shirt, folded arms and a tattoo on one shoulder. This was the most popular tattoo photo with respondents claiming it enhanced the marketability 61% to 39% over the non-tattooed photo.

The 4th and last tattoo photo is a slender girl in a bikini in a profile photo. Her tattooed version was preferred 56% to 44% for the non-tattooed version. Her tattoo was lateral on her torso. We find this to be

a bit of an anomaly since most of the female photos had a strong preference for the non-tattooed version. We cannot speculate on the reason for the preference for this photo.

From these results, it is clear that a nice shoulder tattoo on a masculine male body actually increases the likelihood of a purchase if the setting attempts to highlight his masculinity. There were other male photos that did not have this effect. For example, a tattoo on grandfather's leg was not favored. With the exception of the one bikini photo, tattoos on females diminished the likelihood of purchase and in some cases, dramatically so. The most dramatic case was a cute Asian teen with a short skirted school uniform. She sported a large colorful tattoo on her thigh. This was preferred only 9% of the time and rejected 91% of the time. This image was out of character for what people expected of an Asian school girl. Tattoos clearly are a major consideration for any advertising campaign that includes photography of people.

The group most supportive of tattoo imagery were those people who said they planned to get a tattoo in the near or "very near" future. They selected the tattoo model 46% of the time and the non-tattoo model 54% of the time. What is interesting about this result is that even the most enthusiastic group still selected the tattoo free model the majority of the time.

Persons who said they would never get a tattoo selected the tattoo free model 84% of the time which is no surprise and dramatically different from the prior cohort.

When asked if they thought tattoos break up the symmetry of the body, 55% were either neutral or disagreed. When asked if tattoos created a negative of the person, 73% disagreed. This is an interesting result because it implies a higher level of acceptance of tattoos than was evidenced by the responses to the 23 matched sets. Thus, 69% of the selected photos were without tattoos, but about 73% of people indicated that it was acceptable to have tattoos.

There is a clear progression towards greater acceptance of tattoos in the younger age groups, the oldest age group preferred the tattoos photo 14% of the time and this progressed in the five categories ranging from 14%, 22%, 24%, and 34% and ranked the highest among those people born after 1994 at 38%. These results support the American Demographics/Harris Interactive poll which found 46% of Americans between the ages of 18-24 see visible tattoos as something that is "normal," while the older Americans over 65 did not have the same perception (Whelen, 2001).

The results also showed that males preferred the tattoo photos 27% of the time, and females preferred tattoo photos 32% of the time. Since there was not an even distribution of male and female photos it's hard to derive any conclusions other than the biologically obvious connection that males are attracted to fertility (Burrell, 2015) and that symmetry is part of this attraction and that a tattoo that creates an asymmetrical image would in a five-second glance prove less attractive.

Geographic Distribution

Respondents to the online questions listed 70 different cities as home. Because of the wide geographic distribution, the only obvious cohort is Marshall Minnesota, home of Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) with 55 respondents. As expected, this cohort of younger, mostly SMSU university students chose the tattoo photo 37% of the time. This is a very close match to the 38% approval of the youngest age cohort in the study, thus negating any geographic significance.

The selection of tattooed photos was tested two different ways. The first method was to display only two photos on the screen with the participant given five seconds to choose A or B. The second method was at the end of the survey when it was revealed that the researchers were studying tattoos. The computer screen displayed several matched sets that were labeled. The participants were asked to list the numbers of the photos in which the tattoo added to the appeal of the photo and to list the numbers of the photos in which the tattoo detracted from the appeal of the photo. The results of the two methods were consistent with the 23 earlier sets that were ranked, adding to the validity of the study. This tactic also confirmed that the age of the participant played a major role in accepting tattooed models.

Results as it Impacted Advertising

Respondents were given a set of pictures with tattoos placed at various location on the body, they were to choose which individual with a tattoo increased the likelihood of the clothing being purchased. The results showed that individuals with tattoos on the arm (74%) compared to anywhere else would increase that likelihood, compared to other placement. Additionally, over half of the respondents (55%) felt that tattoos appearing on the shoulder or upper arm of the models increased the attractiveness of the model. But, they thought the tattoos cause the appearance of the model to be out of balance and lose some symmetry.

Overall, respondents reported that tattoos decreased the attractiveness of the person. Noteworthy, is when the tattoos appeared on the leg. Of the respondents who reported that the tattoos would decrease the attractiveness of the person over three-fourths (80%) said that tattoos on the leg would decrease attractiveness the most, compared to those who said it would increase attractiveness (20%) Additionally tattoos on the leg would cause the appearance of the person to be out of balance or lose some symmetry (76%).

Respondents' Comments

In the survey, the respondents view is similar to that of our hypothesis; younger generations, such as millennials, will be more accepting of tattoos in advertising than older generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X. In our survey, when asked, "What types of tattoos would be most effective in selling a product?" most Baby Boomers answered with responses like "*None, tattoos detract from attractive clothing,*" and "*None – it's a passing trend*" or "*None, I wouldn't like to see tattoos when trying to buy.*" Whereas younger generations are more accepting of small tattoos. When asked the same question, Millennials had responses such as, "*Subtle tattoos. Tattoos that are relevant for the age group or group of people that are being sold the clothes. No tattoos for older people,*" and "*I think tattoos that are very neutral and not super distracting.*" Overall, the qualitative responses from our survey validate our assumptions of why certain generations voted for or against various pictures in the survey.

Respondents were asked what types of tattoos they believed would be most effective in selling products such as clothing and accessories. Several of the respondents were concerned that the tattoos would detract from the products. However, 23% felt that if a model were to have a tattoo, then it should not overpower the product.

Some of the responses were as follows:

"smaller tattoos, that way you see the clothing more than the tattoo"

"any tattoos that are not over powering the AD...definitely not tattoos advertising other products that are not to be in the desired advertisement ad"

"small tattoos that are not controversial and appropriate for the look of the average person that wears the clothing..."

"small barely perceptible tattoos in good taste..."

"I don't feel that tattoos help sell but I feel they can make the product less appealing if it overpowers the image"

"I like a clean look so tattoos do not sell a brand or item for me."

"I think simple, subtle, and/or black. If the tattoo is too much it takes away from the advertisement."

"I think tattoos that are very neutral and not super distracting would be good for selling clothing."

"It's not necessarily the tattoo, but in regards to the clothing, it needs to have correct placement and scale compared to what you are selling..."

Further, of the 42% of the respondents who responded to the open-ended questions 16% said that having no tattoos on the model would effectively market and or sell the clothing.

"None, I wouldn't like to see tattoos when trying to buy products as they seem distracting when looking at something."

SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

There is a clear linear pattern in the likelihood of preference based on age. The clear progression of tattoo favorability increases within the younger generations. However, tattooed models did not receive majority preference in any of the stratifications that were used to analyze the 233 respondents. Even the most pro-tattoo groups preferred the tattoo free model the majority of the time.

Overall, the common consensus appears to be that if a model is thinking about entering an industry where they might be used for modeling clothing, they should consider not getting a tattoo that would detract from the clothing. Increasingly there have been ads on television that show individual with tattoos modeling other items besides clothing such as cars, cologne and so on. Anecdotal evidence shows that when an apparel is being advertised there is never a tattoo on the model. This leads one to conclude that though seemingly there is an increased acceptance to people with tattoos among the younger generation, it is still not overly accepted in this industry at the moment.

A major limitation is that the sample was skewed towards the younger generation. Therefore, the preference for photos with tattoos was higher than it would have been if we had a distribution that was equivalent to the actual age distribution of people within the United States. But as previously mentioned, even though the data showed an increased acceptance, they were still able to determine that tattoos diminished the likelihood that someone would purchase a particular clothing. If we had a normal distribution of age groups in the sample, we estimate that instead of 31% preference that the respondents would have preferred tattoos pictures 27% of the time.

Further limitation includes an error in the age categories as it related to generational split. The original intention was to have a clear generational age separation in the surveys; depression era, baby boomers, millennials, generation z but the ages were conflated and therefore a clear distinction cannot be made about the generational differences. But the distinction is made based on age. However, the results still show a clear distinction for tattoo preference among the younger generation. Additionally, though tedious we were able to report on generational differences by using reviewing their ages.

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