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The Stigma Against Tattoos in the Workplace: San Francisco versus Kalamazoo Area

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Creative Honors Thesis Reflection Paper
The Stigma Against Tattoos in the Workplace:
Kalamazoo versus the San Francisco Area
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Abstract

Tattooing is becoming a popular way for individuals, especially young adults, to express themselves. This causes a problem with the hiring process for many companies that have policies against tattoos. The following thesis is a creative representation of the stigma against tattoos in the workplace. This thesis looks at how tattoos change perceptions of employability in the Kalamazoo and San Francisco areas. This topic is portrayed by a 30-inch by 20-inch collage of photographs displaying a variety of different tattoos. There is a total of 55 photographs of tattoos in total, 25 taken in San Francisco and 30 taken in Kalamazoo. Two areas were chosen, Kalamazoo and San Francisco, due to their vastly different views on visible tattoos in the workplace. Each photograph of individuals' tattoos in San Francisco was obtained while on a trip to the Lean Startup Conference conducted by Western Michigan University's course, MGMT 4000. The tattoos were analyzed based on area, profession, type and visibility. It was found that the types of tattoos fit into three different categories: words/numbers, objects, and combination. Out of the 30 photographs of tattoos taken in Kalamazoo 9 out of 30 were words/numbers, 18 out of 30 were objects, and 3 out of 30 were a combination of both. Out of the 25 photographs of tattoos taken in San Francisco 5 out of 25 were words/numbers, 14 out of 25 were objects and 6 out of 25 were a combination of both. Visibility of the tattoos were then determined, and it was found that 37% of the tattoos photographed in Kalamazoo were visible compared to 56% in San Francisco. San Francisco has a creative atmosphere that encourages individuality which can be seen by the percentage of visible tattoos. The west coast focuses on what is in an employees' mind rather than what is on their skin. This is an interesting concept to consider for when young adults decide to get a tattoo or are searching for a job.

The Stigma Against Tattoos in the Workplace:

Kalamazoo versus the San Francisco Area

Tattoos can symbolize many things depending on the individual. Often times, a tattoo portrays an importance that an individual feels the need to remember or honor. Tattooing helps individuals with self-expression and can act as a way for young adult to find themselves. However, tattooing can also cause problems. Especially when career searching, since many companies still have policies against tattoos. This is an issue that I feel personally concerned with. In order to graduate from the Lee Honors College at Western Michigan University, one must complete an honors thesis. For my honors thesis, I decided to take a creative route and look at the stigma against tattoos in the workplace.

The thesis topic of tattoos originated one day while I was getting ready for work. I had just finally found something to wear when I realized that my shoulder tattoo was showing by an inch. An inch too much. My boss had a policy against showing tattoos. However, he so happened to have his wedding band tattooed on his finger. He said this was because he did not like wearing jewelry. This hypocrisy frustrated me to my core. My boss displayed his tattoo that signified his love and devotion to his wife, but my tattoo for my grandfather was inappropriate. This was not the first time I had encountered stigma against my tattoos, and I know it will not be my last.

Once I knew what I wanted my thesis to be about, I had to narrow down the focus. During my last semester at Western I had the great opportunity to travel to San Francisco with my Management 4000 class. I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity since San Francisco is so well known for its relaxed viewpoints on tattoos. Employers in San Francisco are rightfully more concern with what is on the inside of an employee, rather than what is tattooed on the

outside. With this, I narrowed my topic down to look at the difference between how tattoos were viewed at work in San Francisco versus the Kalamazoo area.

In order to show the contrast of stigma between the two areas, I decided to photograph the tattoos and arrange them in a collage. I ended up taking 25 photographs of tattoos in San Francisco and 30 photographs of tattoos in Kalamazoo, for a total of 55 images all together. The photographs were then displayed on 30-inch by 20-inch collages, one for each area.

To further analyze the contrast, I evaluated the tattoos based on area, profession, type and visibility. To get a sense of the tattoos in each area I separated them into three different categories: words/numbers, objects, and combination. It was found that 9 out of 30 photographs of tattoos in Kalamazoo were words/numbers, 18 out of 30 were objects, and 3 out of 30 were a combination of both. As for the photographs of tattoos taken in San Francisco, 5 out of 25 were words/numbers, 14 out of 25 were objects and 6 out of 25 were a combination of both. I realized that the visibility of the tattoos was also an important factor when it came to the workplace. I found that 37% of the tattoos photographed in Kalamazoo were visible compared to 56% in San Francisco.

If I could make any changes to my thesis, I would want to make it more interactive as I originally planned. My first idea was to still create the collages of tattoo photographs, but incorporate information about its owner as well. My thesis would be located in a large gallery where the photographs completely take up one side of the room. On the other side of the room would be information about each tattooed person such as what their profession is, hobbies, or just something they would want a prospective employer to know about them instead of what their tattoo may portray. It would then be a giant matching game to see if viewer could match up

the description of the person to their tattoos. By doing this, the viewer would get a further sense of how they might have stereotypes about tattoos without even realizing it.

Overall, I had a decent experience completing my thesis. I was difficult getting started, but it got easier once I was in the swing of things. I met many incredible people along with way while taking photographs, and am grateful I was able to hear their inspiring stories. I feel that it is important to see an individual for who they are and not for their tattoos, especially in the workplace. San Francisco is such a developing place because of its acceptance of individuals creative self-image. This is something that traditional companies need to take into consideration if they want to compete with the up and coming startups.