

## **Sensations: Religion, Sex, Substance Use, Tattoos, and Religious Tattoos**

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### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

Four bodies of existing research guide our examination and analysis of religiousness and the religiously tattooed. These are (1) tattoos and sensory experience; (2) religion and sensory experience; (3) tattoos and religion; (4) religious tattoos.

#### *Tattoos and Sensory Experience*

Previous research examining the association between having a tattoo and sensory experiences such as drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and engaging in sex, has largely been collectively described as linking tattoos and “deviance.” (Dukes 2016). Alcohol use and premarital sex are common experiences prior to college. 57% of US High School Seniors have experienced sexual intercourse; 41% are current alcohol users (CDC, 2017). Such behavior may be at odds with family norms or religious values, but these behaviors are not rigidly prohibited except perhaps on the most explicitly religious U.S. colleges and university campuses (Koch, Roberts, and Armstrong, 2016).

While illegal marijuana use may be technically considered socially “deviant” in that it’s recreational use remains a crime in seventeen states, there has been a ground swell relaxed prohibitions for decades. California first adopted a medical marijuana provision in 1996. Provisions for medical use are now widespread. Colorado and Washington first fully legalized recreational cannabis use in 2012. As of June 2019, nine other states and the District of Columbia have followed suit. Including states with low THC and CBD oil provisions and programs, only Idaho, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas have no public cannabis access

program (NCSL, 2019). Thus we regard the associations between tattoos, drinking, sex, and pot smoking, to be co-indicators of sensation-seeking rather than social deviance per se.<sup>1</sup>

That said, research consistently shows that having even one tattoo is positively associated with underage drinking, marijuana use, onset of sexual intercourse, and having multiple sex partners (Brooks, Woods, Knight, & Shrier, 2003; Burger & Finkel, 2002; Drews, Allison, & Probst, 2000; Dukes, 2016; Gueguen, 2012; King & Vidourek, 2013; Koch et al 2005; Nowosielski, Sipinski, Kuczerawy, Kozłowska-Rup, & Skrzyplec-Plinta, 2012). However, research also suggests that a threshold of four or more tattoos is more commonly associated with illegal drug use or having an active arrest history (Koch et al 2010).

While the research is not extensive, there is also some evidence that college students with tattoos – especially women – were more likely to score higher on scales measuring sensation-seeking and impulsivity (Roberti, Storch, & Bravata, 2001). This is a refinement on previous research suggesting there is a gendered preponderance toward different types of risk-taking (Drews et al 2000).<sup>2</sup> Tattooed males were reported as more likely to have arrest histories and multiple sex partners. Females with tattoos were more likely to shoplift and use illicit drugs. Thus we would expect that tattoo wearers among our college student sub-samples are more likely to be sensation-seekers, sexually active, underage drinkers, and/or marijuana users.

### *Religion and Sensory Experience*

While there is an extensive body of research examining the association between various aspects of religiosity and risk-taking – substance use, sexual recklessness and the like - there is almost no research connecting religiousness with sensation-seeking in general terms. Forthun,

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<sup>1</sup> Data for this project were gathered from late 2010 through 2013. We regard this time period as near the beginning of what became a rather widespread relaxing of prohibition for cannabis use.

<sup>2</sup> Though arguably similar in concept, we regard risk-taking as categorically different from sensation seeking as we seek clarity on what we define herein as sensory experiences.

Bell, Peek, & Sun (1999) tried to parse the distinction between risky and sensory behavior and found that both are independently suppressed by religion, but the direct connection is absent. Ferguson, Dougherty, and Neubert (2014) showed that religious orthodoxy is negatively associated with entrepreneurial risk, and Liu (2010) demonstrated negative association between risk-taking and religious participation.

Decades of the most cohesive research on the role of religion and what we call sensory experiences (rather than deviance per se) shows consistently negative associations between religious salience and behavior, and substance use and premarital sex (Bock, Cochran, & Beeghley, 1987; Cochran & Akers, 1989; Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004; Nelson & Rooney, 1982; Welch, Tittle, & Grasmick, 2006).

The vector for the essentially suppressive nature of religion centers on what Stark (1996: 164-165) called the Moral Communities Hypothesis:

I suggest that what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment. The idea here is that religion is empowered to produce conformity to the norms only as it is sustained through interaction and is accepted by the majority as a valid basis for action. ... Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, *but only in communities where the majority of the people are actively religious.*

Empirical support for the consistent negative associations between religion and non-conformity validate the Moral Communities Hypothesis through national and purposive samples of adults of all ages (Adamczyk, 2009; Cheadle & Schwadel, 2012; Eitle, 2011; Ford & Kadushin, 2002; Gault-Sherman & Draper, 2012; Koch, Roberts, & Armstrong, 2016; Regnerus, 2003; Sturgis & Baller, 2012; Sturgis, 2010). Thus we would expect that religious respondents

among our college student sub-samples are less likely to be sensation-seekers, sexually active, underage drinkers, and/or marijuana users.

### *Tattoos and Religion*

The Judeo-Christian Old Testament (Torah) seemingly prohibits tattoos: “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:28, New International Version). Among the many (arguably) invasive conversion strategies among early Christian missionaries was to prohibit tattoos among natives (Van Dinter, 2005). Conservative Catholic doctrine, especially as practiced in Latin America, is interpreted as tattoo-prohibitive (Brenneman, 2012).

Empirical evidence is mixed. The (2014) Relationships in America Survey indicates that tattoo-wearers are less likely than those without to regularly attend worship. Koch et al (2004) reported a statistically significant negative association between religiousness and tattoo acquisition and interest. Although they also note the association is substantively weak, and somewhat surprisingly so. Moreover, a recent Harris Poll (2016) suggests that a substantive proportion (1/5) tattoo wearers report that having a tattoo makes them feel more spiritual.

It is clear that religious salience and behavior are negatively associated with “deviance,” especially within strictly religious groups and among clearly identified aggregates (see above). And there remains a stigma against tattoos in some religious circles. Thus, we may expect a negative association between religious salience and belief and tattoo wearing. However, the evidence is open to interpretation and further inquiry.

### *Religious Tattoos*

So far we know: Tattoos are becoming part of mainstream US culture; tattoo wearers seem more likely to seek sensations through substance use and sex; religious belief and behavior

seems negatively associated with substance use and sex. These assertions lead us to wonder: What are the manifestations, motivations, and sensory behavioral correlates among those whose tattoos are explicitly religious?

Though there has been a dearth of scholarly interest in religious tattoos, their visibility has been heightened among popular celebrities and athletes. Justin Bieber, Mary J. Blige, Nick Cannon, Angelina Jolie, and David Beckham (among many others) are “wearing” quotes from sacred texts and displaying explicitly Christian symbols through sometimes dramatically visible religious tattoos (Koch and Dougherty, forthcoming).

Scholarly essayists have mentioned religious tattoos as an emerging trend in especially Evangelical youth (Jensen, Flory, & Miller, (2000); Griffith, 2004). And as far as we know, little else was done at this level of inquiry until Koch and Roberts (2012) somewhat whimsically linked the manner and motivation for religious tattoos to the Protestant Ethic. Maloney and Koch (forthcoming) added depth and evidence to the idea that religious tattoos express reverence and evoke the memory of loved ones. Koch and Dougherty (forthcoming) also drew the parallel that interest and acquisition for religious tattoos are remarkable similar for tattoos in general – sense of self, identity, affiliation, transformation. However, the content of those socio-emotional affects was explicitly religious.

In sum, religious tattoos are something of a theoretical paradox. We’d expect acquiring such would link to the sensory experiences we’ve noted associated with the tattooed in general – substance use and sex. However, the obvious religiousness of those marking their faith permanently on their bodies is associated with reduced levels of those same behavioral correlates. Since to date we know of no data set or existing research examining the religiousness

and behavioral correlates of the religiously tattooed, we defer theoretical speculation to our report below.