



THE TATTOOING PHENOMENON AMONG SCHOOL-ENROLLED ADOLESCENTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN THE WILAYA OF BATNA



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Abstract:

Tattooing is an increasingly prevalent behavioral phenomenon in Algerian school settings, drawing the attention of educators and psychologists due to its psychological significance and social dimensions that affect adolescents at a particularly sensitive stage of development. Yet it has not received sufficient systematic investigation within the Algerian educational environment. This study aims to uncover the psychological significance of the tattooing phenomenon among school-enrolled adolescents in the Wilaya of Batna, through the analysis of its motivations, sources, psychological representations, and the extent of adolescents' awareness of its health risks. A descriptive-analytical design was employed with a purposive sample of 244 school-enrolled adolescents (139 males and 105 females), aged between 11 and 21 years, drawn from middle schools, secondary schools, and institutes in the city of Batna using a questionnaire developed by the author, consisting of 17 items distributed across four axes, supplemented by direct observation and semi-structured interviews.

Results revealed that the dominant psychological representations were: a fashion phenomenon (29.81%), a means of expressing a personal experience (26.72%), and a device for attracting attention (23.27%). The leading motivations were: imitation of celebrities (22.78%), expression of anxiety and personal problems (22.62%), and belonging to the peer group (19.01%). It was also found that peers constitute the primary source of information (53.53%), and that 68.04% of adolescents engaged in tattooing before the age of fifteen. The study further identified a striking cognitive dissonance between actual tattooing behavior and the negative representations held about tattooed persons. The study recommends the development of school-based preventive counseling programs targeting early adolescence as a critical intervention window.

Keywords: Tattooing, School-Enrolled Adolescents, Psychological Significance, School Environment, Identity.

1. Introduction:

1.1 Background: The Body as a Psychological and Cultural Text:

The human body has never been merely a biological substrate. Across the full breadth of human civilization -from the Paleolithic rock engravings of Algeria's Tassili N'Ajjer plateau (c. 6,000–7,000 BCE) to the tattooed mummies of ancient Egypt and Siberia -it has served as a privileged surface for symbolic inscription, a living text upon which individuals and communities engrave meaning, mark transitions, and assert identity (Hamadawi, 2016; Patrick, 2005; Rachi, 2024). Among all body inscription practices, tattooing -the deliberate introduction of pigmented substances beneath the skin's surface to produce permanent or semi-permanent marks -stands as one of the oldest and most geographically universal forms of intentional body communication.

Archaeological evidence confirms tattooing's deep historical roots: the Ötzi Ice Man of the Austrian-Italian Alps (c. 3,300 BCE) bore more than 50 tattoo marks; the Egyptian priestess of Hathor (c. 2,200 BCE) was adorned with dots and lines; and the Pazyryk mummies of Siberia (c. 500 BCE) were decorated with elaborate animal imagery. Closer to the present study's cultural context, the Amazigh heritage of North Africa has long incorporated tattooing as a practice carrying cosmological, therapeutic, aesthetic, and identity functions -a tradition embedded in the cultural memory of the Algerian people (Sari & Qraisat, 2017; Hallouche, 2022; Miloudi & Yahi, 2025).

Throughout this long history, tattooing has carried radically diverse and context-dependent meanings: initiation rites marking the adolescent's passage to adulthood in Polynesian and African tribal cultures; spiritual protection against malevolent forces; social rank and tribal membership in indigenous communities; criminal stigmatization in European penal traditions; and, most recently, aesthetic self-expression within global post-modern consumer culture (Taylib, 2021; Ghandour & Aoudia, 2025). The contemporary era has witnessed a profound democratization of the practice: once confined to the socially marginal -prisoners, sailors, gang members -tattooing has migrated into mainstream culture, normalized by celebrity endorsement, global social media platforms, and youth subcultures that valorize bodily authenticity and transgressive identity (Maddah & Khadiji, 2025).

This normalization has reached Algerian schools with unmistakable force. Educational practitioners, school counselors, and physical education teachers in Batna increasingly observe visible tattoo-like markings -temporary pen drawings, intentional scarifications (*ta'rach*), and in some cases permanent tattoos -on the bodies and clothing of middle and secondary school students. This observation raises urgent psychological and educational questions that the present study is designed to address.

1.2 Theoretical Framework:

1.2.1 Psychodynamic Perspectives:

Sigmund Freud's (1924) foundational insight -that the ego is above all a *bodily ego* -grounds the psychoanalytic reading of tattooing. Didier Anzieu (1985) elaborated this insight into the celebrated concept of the *skin-ego* (*Moi-peau*): the skin functions simultaneously as a container holding the self together, a boundary distinguishing inner from outer, and a communicative surface through which the individual signals identity to others. During adolescence, this psychic geography undergoes radical disruption. The rapid physiological transformations of puberty confront the adolescent with a body that feels foreign and uncomfortably visible to others (Jeammet, 1993, pp. 75–79), generating intense anxiety about bodily mastery and self-authorship. Tattooing may represent a concrete somatic response to this anxiety: the deliberate re-inscription of the skin as one's own, a physical act of bodily reclamation and identity assertion (Larroze-Marracq, 2014; Jeammet, 2001).

Peter Blos's (1979) concept of the "second individuation process" further enriches this framework: the central psychological task of adolescence is the progressive disengagement from primary parental love-objects and the construction of a differentiated personal identity. Tattooing -performed outside parental knowledge, in the company of peers, marking the skin with signs adults cannot read -may constitute a somatic enactment of this individuation, a rite of passage inscribed

upon the body marking the boundary between the dependent child and the emerging autonomous subject.

1.2.2 Sociological and Ecological Perspectives:

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of the body establishes tattooing as a practice embedded within and expressive of the social field: the body is a site where class habitus and cultural capital are written and read (Hamadawi, 2016). In the Algerian school context, adolescent tattooing may be understood as a bodily practice through which young people negotiate their positioning within multiple overlapping social fields -the peer group, the school institution, the family, and the broader cultural field of Algerian-Islamic society.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model situates adolescent behavior within nested environmental systems -microsystem (family, peers, school), mesosystem (linkages between these), exosystem (media, community), and macrosystem (cultural values, religious norms) -that interact dynamically to shape behavioral outcomes (Maqdam, 2012). Applied to adolescent tattooing in Batna, this model directs attention simultaneously to peer group dynamics, the digital media environment, and the Islamic prohibition of permanent tattooing embedded in Algerian cultural values.

Coleman's (1980) focal theory adds a valuable temporal dimension: adolescents confront the multiple psychosocial challenges of this period sequentially -peer relations, identity, sexuality, family autonomy -suggesting that tattooing behavior at any given developmental moment may be understood as a response to whichever focal concern is currently most salient in the adolescent's psychological economy.

1.2.3 Semiological Perspectives:

Marie-Anne Paveau's (2007) linguistic-semiological analysis reveals the deep communicative structure of tattooing: it is not merely decoration but a complex sign -a configuration of form, color, placement, and cultural reference producing meaning for both bearer and observer. The strong preference for cryptic symbols and secret signs documented in the present study suggests a semiological strategy of selective legibility: maximum peer-readability combined with adult-opacity, simultaneously asserting identity within the peer group and maintaining a protective boundary against institutional surveillance (Taylib, 2021; Hallouche, 2022).

1.3 The Algerian Adolescent: Between Tradition and Modernity:

The Algerian adolescent inhabits a particularly complex socio-cultural space. Between the inherited values of Islamic tradition -which explicitly prohibits permanent tattooing, citing the *hadith* of the Prophet (PBUH) that curses both the one who tattoos and the one who is tattooed -and the Amazigh cultural heritage in which tattooing has historically carried cosmological and aesthetic functions (Sari & Qraisat, 2017), the Algerian adolescent already navigates significant normative complexity. The superimposition of globalizing digital media and Western celebrity culture that normalizes tattooing creates what Aqoun (2011, as cited in Zaghez, 2014) terms an identity "compressed between tradition and modernity" -a condition of normative duality whose resolution is partly enacted upon the adolescent's body.

The school simultaneously constitutes a site of normative social control and a social arena in which peer group dynamics and transgressive identity experimentation unfold largely outside adult observation. It is within this contradictory institutional space that the tattooing practices documented in the present study occur.

1.4 Research Gap and Objectives:

Despite a growing international literature on adolescent body modification (Bekis & Bacha, 2022; Boughalam, 2024; Dahan, 2012), empirically grounded psychological research on school-

based tattooing in Algeria is virtually non-existent, Domestic studies have focused on adults in penal settings (Amziane, 2013; Zaghez, 2014), employed anthropological frameworks (Karkouche, 2015; Hamadawi, 2016; Taylib, 2021), or examined individual clinical cases (Bekis & Bacha, 2022). No published study has systematically examined tattooing among school-enrolled Algerian adolescents. This study addresses that gap through four research questions:

- **RQ1:** What psychological representations do school-enrolled adolescents in Batna construct around tattooing?
- **RQ2:** What are the primary motivations driving their engagement with tattooing?
- **RQ3:** What are the principal information sources through which they access tattooing knowledge?
- **RQ4:** What is the extent of their awareness of the health risks associated with tattooing?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design:

A descriptive-analytical design was employed, consistent with the study's aim to systematically characterize the tattoo-related attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and psychological representations of a defined school-enrolled adolescent population in Batna (Turki, 1984). This design permits identification of frequencies, proportional distributions, and thematic patterns constituting the essential evidence base for subsequent analytical and experimental research.

2.2 Exploratory Phase:

Prior to the main study, an exploratory investigation was conducted at Ibn Badis Middle School, Batna. Three complementary methods were employed:

- Semi-structured interviews with educational assistants and physical education teachers -staff best positioned to observe students' bodies and informal behaviors -focusing on the frequency, types, and perceived meanings of tattooing behaviors among students.
- Direct observation in school courtyards, corridors, and sports halls, focusing on visible markings on students' exposed skin and clothing.
- Preliminary questionnaire administration with a purposive sample of 20 students (16 males, 4 females), confirming appropriate item wording and yielding an average administration time of 30 minutes.

2.3 Participants:

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Study Sample (N = 244)

Variable	Category	n	%
Sex	Male	139	56.96
	Female	105	43.03
Age Group	11–14 years (Early adolescence)	124	50.81
	15–17 years (Middle adolescence)	87	35.65
	18–21 years (Late adolescence)	33	13.52
Father's Education	University	82	33.60
	Secondary	84	34.42
	Middle school	47	19.26
	Primary	14	5.73

	No formal education	12	4.91
Mother's Education	University	80	32.78
	Secondary	66	27.04
	Middle school	47	19.26
	Primary	26	10.65
	No formal education	16	6.55

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Table 2. Distribution of Participants Across Recruitment Sites

Institution / Site	n	%
Kada Ammar Middle School	88	36.06
Tariq Ibn Ziad Middle School	42	17.21
Ibn Badis Middle School	31	12.70
Aicha Bahlouel Secondary School	30	12.29
Hamla Middle School	18	7.37
Municipal Multi-Sports Hall	20	8.19
Youth Medical Unit (Directorate of Youth & Sports)	15	6.14
Total	244	100

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Inclusion Criteria: (a) Age 11–21 years; (b) confirmed school enrollment; (c) having personally tattooed the body or clothing, or having a tattooed friend or family member. **Sampling procedure:** A combined purposive and snowball strategy was employed. Educational staff identified initial participants who then nominated further participants from their social networks.

Table 3. Questionnaire Distribution and Return Rate:

Distributed	Returned	Excluded	Final Valid Sample
280	246 (87.86%)	2 (0.72%)	244

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

2.4 Research Instrument

Table 4. Structure of the Research Questionnaire:

Axis	Thematic Content	Items	Item Format
I	Types and methods of tattooing	7	Dichotomous, multiple-choice, open-ended
II	Sources and motivations	3	Multiple-choice, open-ended
III	Benefits, harms, health risk awareness	3	Multiple-choice, open-ended
IV	Psychological description and representation	4	Multiple-choice, open-ended
—	Sociodemographic data	4	Categorical
Total		17	

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

The questionnaire was developed through: (a) theoretical literature review; (b) exploratory phase findings; (c) expert panel content validity review by psychology faculty; (d) pilot administration and revision. Written instructions confirmed the study's academic and strictly confidential nature. No identifying information was collected.

2.5 Ethical Considerations:

Formal authorization was obtained from the Directorate of Education and the Directorate of Youth and Sports of the Wilaya of Batna. Participation was voluntary; institutional gatekeepers provided site-level authorization.

2.6 Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics - frequencies and percentages - for each item across all sites. Qualitative open-ended responses were analyzed thematically and integrated into the results narrative. Given the multiple-response format of several items, the total number of responses (N) across tables exceeds the total sample size (N = 244). Tables reporting multiple-response data display the total number of responses rather than the number of respondents. Sub-sample analyses (Tables 16–17) include only participants meeting the specific inclusion criterion for each item.

3. Results:

3.1 Axis I -Types and Methods of Tattooing:

Table 5. Attitudes Toward Tattooing and Self-Reported Tattooing Behaviors (N = 244):

Item	Response	n	%
Likes tattooing	Yes	100	40.98
	No	142	58.19
Has tattooed own body	Yes	55	22.54
	No	189	77.45
Has drawn tattoo designs on clothing	Yes	58	23.77
	No	183	75.00

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Despite a majority (58.19%) expressing dislike of tattooing, 22.54% acknowledged tattooing their bodies and 23.77% reported drawing tattoo designs on their clothing -a notable attitude-behavior discrepancy reflecting simultaneous normative social pressure against tattooing and its behavioral attraction.

Table 6. Most Preferred Tattoo Designs Admired Among Peers (Multiple Response, N = 341)

Design Category	Frequency	%	Rank
Secret / cryptic symbols	89	26.09	1st
Skull	86	25.21	2nd
Flower	64	18.76	3rd
Scorpion	47	13.78	4th
Snake	29	8.05	5th
Dragon	26	7.62	6th
Other (hearts, names of loved ones, nationalist marks)	—	—	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Secret symbols ranked first across the full sample, reflecting the adolescent preference for exclusive signs inaccessible to adult interpretation -a semiological strategy of selective legibility. Skulls ranked second, driven predominantly by male preferences; flowers ranked third as the design most preferred by female participants.

Table 7. Preferred Tattoo Subject Categories for Personal Use (Multiple Response, N = 322):

Category	Frequency	%
Abstract symbols and shapes	73	22.67
Words / written phrases	63	19.56
Animals	52	16.14
Numbers and letters	46	14.28
Human figures	46	14.28
Plants / flowers	42	13.04
Other (Masonic symbols, graves, anti-state imagery)	—	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Table 8. Tools Used by Peers to Execute Tattoos (Multiple Response, N = 381):

Instrument	Frequency	%	Rank
Mador (compass point)	91	23.88	1st
Razor blade	70	18.37	2nd
Broken glass	67	17.58	3rd
Needle	59	15.48	4th
Specialized tattoo machine	49	12.86	5th
Knife	45	11.81	6th
Other (ballpoint pen, pencil sharpener blade)	—	—	Frequently cited

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

The three most common instruments -compass point, razor blade, and ballpoint pen -are all standard school supplies, confirming the school environment as an inadvertent enabling context for tattooing. This finding carries direct public health implications.

Table 9. Social Network Density: Number of Tattooed Individuals Known (N = 213)

Number Known	n	%
One person	47	22.06
More than 3 persons	83	38.96
More than 10 persons	83	38.96

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

The high density -77.92% of participants knowing more than three tattooed individuals -directly confirms peer-network diffusion as the primary social mechanism through which tattooing spreads in this population.

3.2 Axis II -Sources and Motivations of Tattooing

Table 10. Primary Information Sources About Tattooing (Multiple Response, N = 269)

Source	Frequency	%	Rank
Peers	144	53.53	1st
Internet	100	37.17	2nd
Specialized tattoo parlors	25	9.29	3rd
Other (barbershops, music videos, television)	—	—	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Peers accounted for more than half of all cited information sources, followed at a meaningful distance by the internet -confirming the primacy of direct face-to-face social influence over digitally mediated exposure in this adolescent population.

Table 11. Motivations Driving Adolescent Engagement with Tattooing (Multiple Response, N = 610)

Motivation	Frequency	%	Rank
Imitation / emulation of celebrities (actors, athletes)	139	22.78	1st
Expression of anxiety or a personal problem	138	22.62	2nd
Belonging to the peer group	116	19.01	3rd
Aesthetic decoration / beauty	115	18.85	4th
Presence of tattooed persons in environment	61	10.00	5th
Direct pressure from tattooed peers	41	6.72	6th
Other (romantic separation, desire for strength)	—	—	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Table 12. Perceived Bodily Autonomy (N = 239)

Response	n	%
Agree: "A person has the right to do as they wish with their body"	92	38.49
Disagree	83	34.72
Don't know	64	26.77

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

The near-equal three-way distribution captures the adolescent's transitional moral status: the largest group (38.49%) asserts individual bodily autonomy, a substantial minority (34.72%) internalizes the socio-religious norm of bodily restraint, and more than a quarter (26.77%) experience genuine normative uncertainty.

3.3 Axis III -Perceived Benefits, Harms, and Health Risk Awareness

Table 13. Perceived Benefits of Tattooing (Multiple Response, N = 530)

Perceived Benefit	Frequency	%	Rank
Bragging / showing off	130	24.52	1st
Aesthetic enhancement / beauty	120	22.64	2nd
Sense of strength and masculinity	96	18.11	3rd
Relief from anxiety and psychological pressure	85	16.03	4th
Carries personal meaning for the bearer	75	14.15	5th
Sensory / physical pleasure	24	4.52	6th

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Table 14. Perceived Health and Social Risks of Tattooing (Multiple Response, N = 600)

Perceived Risk	Frequency	%	Rank
Skin cancer	165	27.50	1st
Social labeling as a "bad person"	145	24.16	2nd
Local skin infection / suppuration	123	20.50	3rd
Contemptuous social gaze	99	16.50	4th
HIV / AIDS transmission	68	11.33	5th

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Despite documented awareness of these risks, participants continued to tattoo using improvised, unsterilized school instruments -confirming the adolescent optimism bias: risks are acknowledged abstractly but felt to be personally inapplicable (Elkind, 1967).

Table 15. Social Perception of Tattooed Individuals (Multiple Response, N = 370)

Perception	Frequency	%
Deviant person	131	35.40
Non-compliant / irresponsible	64	17.29
Psychologically disturbed	62	16.75
Unworthy of respect	60	16.21
Normal person	53	14.32

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

This distribution constitutes the study's most analytically significant finding: adolescents who engage in tattooing simultaneously endorse profoundly negative representations of tattooed individuals -a cognitive dissonance that directly indexes the conflict between individual behavioral agency and internalized social-religious values.

3.4 Axis IV -Psychological Representations of Tattooing

Table 16. Type of Tattoo Practiced by Participants (Self-Reporters, N = 197)

Type	Frequency	%
Temporary (pen drawing, washable)	106	53.80
Scratching / Scarification (<i>ta'rach</i>)	54	27.41
Permanent (dermal ink injection)	22	11.16
Other / no response	15	7.61

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

The dominance of temporary tattooing (53.80%) and scarification (27.41%) over permanent tattooing (11.16%) is a finding of major theoretical and clinical significance: most school-based tattooing represents a reversible compromise response to identity and emotional needs. Notably, participants tended to prefer the term "tattoo" (French loanword) over the Arabic *washm*, suggesting a distancing from the full social implications of permanent body modification.

Table 17. Age of First Engagement with Tattooing (N = 169)

Age at First Tattooing	n	%
Before 15 years (early adolescence)	115	68.04
After 15 years	54	31.95

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

Nearly seven in ten participants (68.04%) first engaged with tattooing before age 15, identifying the middle school transition as the critical developmental window for preventive intervention.

Table 18. Primary Psychological Representations of Tattooing (Multiple Response, N = 550)

Psychological Representation	Frequency	%	Rank
Fashion phenomenon / trend	164	29.81	1st
Means of expressing a personal experience	147	26.72	2nd
Visual device for attracting attention	128	23.27	3rd
Substitute for making oneself unique / original	73	13.27	4th
Indispensable complement to personal style	38	6.90	5th
Other (experimentation, life narrative, tension release)	—	—	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on SPSS (Version 27) output.

4. Discussion:

4.1 Tattooing as Fashion: Normalization of Transgression:

The dominant psychological representation of tattooing as a *fashion trend* (29.81%) reflects the powerful globalizing effect of contemporary celebrity culture and digital media on adolescent body aesthetics. In Hall's (1904) foundational account, adolescence is the developmental period of maximum susceptibility to collective suggestion and imitative behavior -the phase in which individuals are most likely to adopt group-wide fashions as mechanisms of social participation. The adolescent who engages in tattooing precisely because "it is what celebrities and athletes do," while simultaneously dismissing it as "having no real value," illustrates the classical attitude-behavior inconsistency characteristic of adolescent normative pressure conditions (Khlif, 1992).

This finding replicates Dahan's (2012) earlier Algerian study, in which adolescents similarly described tattooing as a "new and strange Western fashion." It also connects to the broader sociological observation that Algerian identity is being negotiated under conditions of acute normative duality -between the Islamic-traditional framework prohibiting tattooing and the globally-mediated consumerist-individualist framework valorizing it (Aqoun, 2011, as cited in Zaghez, 2014). The adolescent body becomes the visible site upon which this normative conflict is performed and temporarily resolved through the compromise of *temporary* rather than *permanent* tattooing. The fashion framing allows adolescents to inhabit the transgression without fully owning its social costs

-a sophisticated psychosocial maneuver consistent with the demands of the adolescent identity moratorium (Erikson, 1968).

4.2 Tattooing as Emotional Expression: Psychic Regulation Through the Body:

The second most prominent representation -*tattooing as expression of a personal experience* (26.72%) -and the closely aligned motivation of *expressing anxiety or a personal problem* (22.62%) reveals the deeper psychodynamic regulatory function of body inscription in adolescent psychological life. For a substantial proportion of Batna's school-enrolled adolescents, tattooing functions as a somatic strategy for managing internal emotional states that resist verbal or symbolic articulation.

Winnicott's (1971) concept of transitional space -the intermediate area between internal experience and external reality where creative self-expression occurs -locates tattooing within the domain of symbolic play with the body: the adolescent inscribes the skin with symbols that bridge inner psychic reality and outer social visibility. When adequate containment by the social environment is absent, the body itself becomes the medium of last resort for communicating unbearable internal states (Jeammet, 2001; Larroze-Marracq, 2014). This is consistent with Ladane's (1981, as cited in Zaghez, 2014) argument that when the adolescent ego weakens and narcissistic vulnerability is high, the adolescent may initiate somatic alternatives to symbolic expression, converting internal tension into visible bodily marks.

The clinical significance of the *ta'rach* (scarification) finding -reported by 27.41% of the sample -deserves specific attention. The deliberate scratching of the skin through self-inflicted pain occupies a clinical borderland between aesthetic tattooing and self-harm, sharing the psychic functions of affect regulation, externalization of internal pain, and symbolic communication of uncontainable distress (Bekis & Bacha, 2022). The convergence in this study of early onset (before 15 years: 68.04%), high motivation by anxiety and personal problems (22.62%), and substantial prevalence of scarification (27.41%) constitutes a specific risk profile warranting systematic clinical follow-up by school psychological services. Dahan's (2012) parallel Algerian findings -8% prior suicide attempts, 63% body scratching to express suffering, 62% self-burning -suggest these indicators should be taken seriously as potential early signals of deeper psychological distress.

4.3 Tattooing as Attention-Seeking: Narcissistic Dynamics and Identity Performance:

The third most prominent representation -*tattooing as a visual device for attracting attention* (23.27%) -and the consistent preference for *visible* (28.97%) and *colored* (29.43%) tattoos reveals the narcissistic regulatory function of adolescent body inscription. Following the disorienting bodily transformations of puberty, the adolescent enters a period of intensified self-monitoring, body-image anxiety, and preoccupied social comparison (Bihtar, 2016). The tattoo, particularly when chromatic and visually prominent, functions as a bid for the social gaze: a deliberate invitation to be looked at, recognized, and differentiated from the undifferentiated mass of one's peers.

Khilil (2012) articulates this through the concept of the tattoo as *narcissistic restitution*: a compensatory assertion of bodily ownership and social visibility in response to the ego's heightened fragility during adolescence. In this reading, the tattoo asserts: "This body has been marked by me; I have authored it; I am distinct; I exist." This addresses the central anxiety of adolescence -what Erikson (1968) identifies as the threat of role diffusion -by making the body a visible monument to individual distinctiveness.

The dominant preference for *cryptic symbols* (26.09%) introduces a critical qualification: these are signs designed to be simultaneously visible -attracting the peer gaze -and opaque -resisting adult decipherment. This dual-vector semiological strategy constitutes a psychosocially sophisticated maneuver: the adolescent projects visibility within the peer community while maintaining a protective envelope of opacity vis-à-vis parental and institutional surveillance (Taylib, 2021). The tattoo

functions at once as a social announcement and as a cryptographic lock, simultaneously projecting and concealing the self.

4.4 Peer Influence and Digital Media: The Dual Infrastructure of Tattooing:

The identification of *peers* as both the dominant information source (53.53%) and a leading behavioral motivation (peer belonging: 19.01%) is consistent with the established literature on adolescent socialization (Coleman, 1980; Jeammet, 2001), During early and middle adolescence - precisely the window in which 68.04% of participants first engaged with tattooing -the peer group supplants the family as the primary normative reference point, and conformity to group identity markers becomes a central mechanism of social belonging (Shari'm, 2009).

The tattoo functions in this peer ecology as a *tribal marker*: a visible emblem simultaneously symbolizing group belonging and differentiating members from non-members. Roberts's (as cited in Zaghez, 2014) sociological observation that tattoos serve as group membership indicators across diverse social formations finds direct empirical support in the finding that 77.92% of participants know more than three tattooed individuals in their immediate social environment. The snowball recruitment methodology employed in this study traces precisely this diffusion pattern: tattooing spreads through peer networks as a norm-contagion process.

The secondary role of digital media as an information source (37.17%) carries important implications. Global platforms increasingly function not merely as information sources but as *normalization infrastructures*: spaces in which tattooed celebrities, athletes, and influencers collectively construct a youth-cultural consensus in which the tattooed body is represented as desirable, authentic, and emotionally expressive (Ghandour & Aoudia, 2025), For the Algerian adolescent navigating the tension between Islamic tradition and digital modernity, this normalization environment carries particular persuasive force precisely because it is immersive, personalized, and peer-validated.

4.5 Celebrity Imitation and Identificatory Dynamics:

The ranking of *celebrity imitation* as the single most common motivation (22.78%) warrants nuanced psychological analysis. The psychoanalytic concept of identificatory idealization (A. Freud, 1936; Erikson, 1968) provides the necessary framework: the adolescent invests a celebrity figure with the attributes of the ego-ideal and attempts to embody them. Crucially, the direction of identification is not toward talent or achievement per se but toward the celebrity's *body as adorned and performed* -toward the tattooed body as a sign of a particular identity: physically mastered, globally connected, and beyond conventional normative constraint.

For the Algerian adolescent caught in the identity impasse between tradition and modernity, the celebrity tattoo may represent an imaginary resolution: a way of symbolically inhabiting global modernity while managing its social costs through the protective screen of "it's just a fashion." The imitation thus serves not merely as behavioral modeling but as an act of identity fantasy: trying on, through the skin, a self that feels more powerful and more globally connected than the one available within the constraints of everyday Algerian social reality.

4.6 The Central Paradox: Cognitive Dissonance Between Practice and Representation:

The most analytically significant finding of this study is the persistent cognitive dissonance between participants' behavioral engagement in tattooing and their simultaneous endorsement of profoundly negative social representations of tattooed individuals. Fully 35.40% characterized tattooed persons as "deviant," 17.29% as "irresponsible," 16.75% as "psychologically disturbed," and 16.21% as "unworthy of respect" -while the same participants simultaneously practiced tattooing. Only 14.32% described a tattooed person as "normal."

This paradox operates at multiple levels. At the sociological level, it reflects the deep internalization of dominant normative discourses -Islamic jurisprudential prohibition, family disapproval, institutional regulation -that constitute the moral environment of Algerian adolescent socialization. To publicly condemn tattooing is to perform social conformity; to privately practice it is to exercise subcultural identity. The adolescent holds both positions without experienced contradiction, consistent with Khlifah's (1992) observation that value endorsement and behavioral enactment are regularly dissociated in adolescent psychology.

At the psychodynamic level, this dissonance reflects the fundamental adolescent ambivalence toward transgression. The tattoo is precisely psychologically effective *because* it is socially prohibited and *because* it provokes the disapproving adult gaze. The social condemnation is not an obstacle to the practice but a condition of its psychological function: the prohibition constitutes the boundary whose crossing demonstrates autonomy (Blos, 1979; Jeammet, 2001). Prevention programs that operate by reinforcing the negative social judgment of tattooed persons are therefore likely to be counterproductive. Effective intervention must instead address the underlying psychological needs that tattooing serves.

4.7 Health Risk Awareness Without Behavioral Inhibition:

The coexistence of documented health risk awareness (skin cancer: 27.5%; infection: 20.5%; HIV: 11.33%) with continued tattooing using unsterilized school instruments represents the public health dimension of the cognitive dissonance structure. Elkind's (1967) developmental concept of the *personal fable* -the adolescent's characteristic belief in personal invulnerability -explains this pattern: the adolescent knows abstractly that unsterilized instruments can transmit blood-borne pathogens but does not experience this danger as applying to their own specific tattooing episode.

The use of school instruments (compass points: 23.88%; razor blades: 18.37%; broken glass: 17.58%) as primary tattooing tools constitutes a concrete public health concern, creating direct transmission pathways for hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV within the school setting. This finding calls urgently for school health policy revision and targeted health communication campaigns that address the specific risk contexts adolescents actually inhabit -rather than abstract health warnings that the personal fable reliably neutralizes.

5. Conclusion:

5.1 Summary of Principal Findings:

This study has provided the first systematic descriptive account of the tattooing phenomenon among school-enrolled adolescents in the Wilaya of Batna. Its findings yield six principal conclusions:

- ❖ Adolescent tattooing in Batna schools is predominantly temporary and semi-reversible (temporary: 53.80%; scarification: 27.41%; permanent: 11.16%), representing a psychologically sophisticated compromise between transgressive identity expression and the social costs of permanent body modification in an Islamic socio-cultural context.
- ❖ The critical onset window is early adolescence before age 15 (68.04%), identifying the middle school transition as the priority target for preventive psychological intervention.
- ❖ Tattooing serves multiple overlapping psychological functions -fashion participation, emotional regulation, narcissistic self-assertion, peer belonging, and transgressive autonomy -confirming the inadequacy of single-cause models.
- ❖ Peers (53.53%) and digital media (37.17%) constitute the dual pillars of adolescent tattoo socialization, requiring peer-sensitive and digitally-informed prevention strategies.
- ❖ A structural cognitive dissonance between behavioral engagement and negative social representations of tattooed persons indexes the central normative tension in Algerian adolescent identity between globalizing individualism and Islamic-traditional values.

- ❖ Health risk awareness coexists with behavioral continuation using unsterilized school instruments, confirming the primacy of psychosocial over rational-health motivations and calling for emotionally resonant preventive approaches.

5.2 Recommendations:

For school psychological services: Develop structured preventive counseling programs specifically targeting students aged 11–14 years, addressing emotional regulation, identity exploration, peer-pressure resistance, and healthy self-expression. Train educational assistants and physical education teachers to identify and appropriately respond to tattooing behaviors, distinguishing aesthetic practices from clinically significant scarification. Establish referral protocols linking school counselors to clinical services for adolescents presenting scarification or anxiety-related tattooing motivations.

For health education: Integrate targeted health literacy content into middle school curricula addressing the specific risks of improvised tattooing instruments, using peer-mediated and narrative communication formats appropriate to the adolescent developmental stage.

For family and community: Develop school-based parenting support programs providing parents with age-appropriate strategies for maintaining open communication with adolescents about identity, peer pressure, and body-related decision-making.

For research: Future studies should employ longitudinal designs; qualitative and projective methodological investigations; integration of validated psychometric instruments (depression, anxiety, identity diffusion scales); and comparative studies across Algerian regions to identify moderating variables.

5.3 Study Limitations

The descriptive cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. The purposive-snowball sampling strategy limits generalizability. The absence of standardized validated psychometric instruments limits the depth of psychological profiling. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal, mixed-methods designs incorporating standardized clinical measures.

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