Signs of social change on the bodies of youth: tattoos in Korea

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ABSTRACT
The Korean word for tattoo is munshin, meaning ‘letters engraved on the body’. Munshins could only be seen on Korean gangsters just a few decades ago, but today, increasingly more young Korean people are getting fashionable tattoos like a butterfly or a cross on easily visible parts of their body. The aim of this article is to examine the changing tattoo culture in Korea and find out what it reveals about Korean society, South Korean attitudes about individualism, globalization and modernity, and how these attitudes are related to local and global issues. Based on discourse analysis, field research and interviews, the results indicate that tattoos on the bodies of Korean youth are a fashion statement, expression of self and signs of social change. As the country develops economically and makes further global advancements, Korean society is changing towards expression of individuality, a higher interest in appearance and stronger competition.

KEYWORDS
Korea • Korean society • tattoos • youth

INTRODUCTION
Tattoos are prevalent in the 21st century. Famous soccer stars like David Beckham plays in games that are broadcast worldwide showing off his arms covered in tattoos, and fans of Angelina Jolie know the meaning of each of the tattoos on her body. Even figures of a socially ‘respectable’ status have tattoos. Princess Stephanie of Monaco has flowers, dolphins and text tattoos, former secretary of state of the United States George Shultz has a tattoo of a tiger in honor of his alma mater, Princeton University, and even a version of the world famous children’s doll Barbie, named Butterfly Art Barbie, had a butterfly tattoo on her stomach in 1999.
However, tattoos were not socially acceptable at all in South Korea just a decade ago. Hardly anyone openly had a tattoo, and young people just experimented with sticker or henna tattoos in the early 2000s. Much has changed recently, and today, many young people have tattoos. The older generations still do not look kindly upon those with tattoos, but seeing a person with a tattoo has become less of an unusual phenomenon in Korean society.

The aim of this article is to examine how the tattoo culture is changing in Korea and find out first, what tattoos reflect about Korean society; second, what the recent popularity of tattoos indicates about South Korean attitudes about individualism, globalization and modernity; and third, how the shifts in these attitudes are related to local and global issues.

The article is based on discourse analysis and close readings of academic studies, books, newspapers and the internet on tattoos and tattoo culture in Korea, field examination of people with tattoos and the reactions they receive, and interviews with Korean people with tattoos in Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

FROM MUNSHIN TO TATTOOS
Tattooing is probably the most ancient form of body alteration. Archeological evidence suggests that people were getting tattoos as early as in the late Stone Age. There is evidence of tattoos from carved European figures from 6000 BC and Egyptian figurines from 4000 BC. Tattooing spread from the Middle East to India, China, and Japan, and the Pacific Islands in around 2000 BC (Sanders and Vail, 2008: 9). The word 'tattoo' comes from the Polynesian word 'tatau', which means 'artistic' or 'outstanding' (Ebin, 1988: 6). As the meaning suggests, tattooing is considered a form of body adornment.

In ancient Greece and Rome, criminals were tattooed with marks of their crime, such as the name of the crime committed or the punishment they were to receive. Therefore, tattooing naturally became associated with criminality in Western civilization as it continued through the Middle Ages in Europe (Fisher, 2002: 92–93). In the 18th and 19th centuries, tattooing spread among sailors in Europe and the United States as they returned home with tattoos from their voyages to foreign lands. Tattooed 'freaks' were an attraction at the circus in the 1850s (Govenar, 2004: 30), and then, during the American Civil War, tattoos became acceptable and gained widespread popularity as soldiers tattooed their political preference or cause in the war. Not much differentiated the Confederate and Union members, so they probably chose to use military uniform color and inscriptions on their bodies to create a clear difference during this confusing time (Govenar, 2000). In around 1880, the electric tattoo machine was invented by Samuel F O'Reiley, which made the process faster and largely decreased the pain (Govenar, 2004: 30). While American servicemen and carnival exhibits were known for their tattoos in the 19th century, later, the American working class got tattoos, probably thanks to advancements such as
the development of the machine. In the mid 19th century, tattoo images in the West among the working class were generally symbols like a skull, animals like snakes, or pin-up styled women.

At the end of the 18th century and early 19th centuries, an illustrated work of fiction from China called *Suikoden*, meaning ‘The Water Margin’, was imported first to Japan and then to the West, and resulted in a strong interest in and desire for tattoos in the Western world like never before. The story was about 108 heroes who fought against wealthy and corrupt bureaucrats, and the most popular characters were tattooed. The popularity of tattoos sharply increased when woodblock prints of the heroes were printed in the early to mid 19th century (Green, 2003: xiii). Unlike the concerns of Emperor Meiji, who banned the Japanese *irezumi* tattoos of gods, mythical creatures and other images from popular stories because he was worried Westerners just entering the country would find them barbaric, European and American sailors were fascinated by them and received tattoos themselves before returning on board. The *irezumi* tattoo culture continued underground among the lower classes such as labor workers, criminals and fire fighters, and is still the choice of tattoo today for Japanese organized crime gang, the *yakuza* (Sanders and Vail, 2008: 12).

At the end of the 1880s, tattoos became fashionable among the upper classes in England and the United States. However, the upper classes still frowned upon the tattoos of the lower classes, as they were understood to signify deviance, and the upper classes differentiated themselves with tattoos of a completely different style. The popular style was similar to Japanese tattoos, and they signified that the wearer of the tattoo was traveled and internationally cultured (Fisher, 2002: 94–95). Tattoos of the working class at this time reflected personal experiences. The main reasons why tattoos spread among the upper classes during this period are inferred to be because of the appearance of the electric tattoo machine, and the availability of more designs, including Japanese designs and styles (Blanchard, 1994).

By the mid 20th century, although some European and American elites had tried tattooing, it remained a tool of stigma and rebellion (Sanders and Vail, 2008: 18). Tattoos were still a symbol for small groups such as bikers and convicts. It was only by the late 20th century that a broad range of members of the middle class had tattoos (DeMello, 2000: 2).

Tattoos disappeared from the military after World War II, as part of the American Return to Normalcy Movement. The military opposed tattoos because of the erotic images soldiers chose, because it became recognized as a public health hazard, and it was a symbol of the damages of World War II. Therefore, tattoos became associated with the working class and drunks in the 1950s, and also developed into a form of rebellion by teenagers (Fisher, 2002: 97). Since the mid-1960s, tattooing gradually leaked into the mainstream and, recently, is even being recognized as ‘art’ (Sanders and Vail, 2008: 19). It stuck with the teenage and youth age group through the 1960s and 1970s with the
emergence of rebellious subcultures such as hippies and punks (Fisher, 2002: 97). As tattoos started not only to be worn by young people, but also to be created by younger tattooists, tattoos started to become ‘cool’. While tattooists up until the mid-20th century were usually lower class men who tattooed for money, younger university or art school graduate tattooists appeared since the 1960s, who tattooed as a form of artistic expression and emphasized creativity and custom images for their clients (Sanders and Vail, 2008: 19). Today, the tattoo trend remains a strong one among young people, and has a stronger fashionable aspect than a rebellious aspect. Lightly tattooed subjects in a 1999 study said they considered their tattoo to be ‘like an extra accessory kind of thing’, or ‘not such a big deal’ (Sweetman, 1999: 56).

Tattooing has moved now into the realm of popular culture, and there are many tattoo-related TV shows, such as ‘Miami Ink’ on TLC or ‘Tattoo Stories’ on FUSE in the United States. However, such contents and products are not available in Korea.

The Korean word for tattoo is munshin (문신), and has a slightly different meaning from the Polynesian meaning of ‘artistic’ or ‘outstanding’, as mentioned above. Munshin literally means ‘letters engraved on the body’. Records related to munshins in Korea appear in historic Chinese literature such as ‘Samgukji’ or ‘Dongijeon’, and show that Koreans had munshins as early as the Samhan Age (Cho, 2002: 151–173). The first Korean documents to record munshins are from the Three Kingdoms Period. Records show that munshins were used as a form of punishment in the early Joseon Dynasty. Some yangbans, or nobles of dynastic Korea, used munshins to make a mark on their servants so they could not run away. The usage of munshins spread widely with time, and in the modern age, it developed into a sign of membership among criminals or gangs in Korea, taking after the customs of the yakuza, in Japan.

An analysis of the perception of tattoos and munshins in Korea in 2008 found that Korean consumers consider tattoos and munshins to be different, and have a preference for the word tattoo, especially when talking about fashion tattoos. They linked tattoos with positive images such as being individual, sexy, open, attractive, decorative, free and fashionable images, while they associated munshins mostly with negative images such as threatening, violent, scary, negative, anti-social, masculine or grotesque images (Song and Park, 2008: 260–261).

A 2006 study on tattoo-related internet websites in Korea found that the most popular tattoo pattern for men and women was animal patterns (30.2%), followed by character patterns (24.1%), geometric patterns (13.0%), natural patterns (10.3%), plant patterns, (4.7%), mixed patterns (2.5%), and artificial patterns (2.2%). The dragon (10.3%) was the most popular pattern. The upper arm (26.6%) was the most popular position for a tattoo, followed by the shoulder (10.8%), back (10.5%), wrist (10.0%), calf (7.5%), lower back (7.0%), and breast (6.3%). The upper arm was the most popular position for
men (38.2%), and the lower back (17.7%) was the most popular for women (Chung and Lee, 2007: 12).

There are currently hundreds of tattoo parlors in Seoul alone. In 2012, there were around 300 parlors in the Hongik University area, although many have moved to the Gangnam area, where many young people interested in tattoos reside (Kim, 2012).

However, almost all of these places are operating illegally, because in Korea, only medical doctors can legally provide tattoo services. Tattoos are categorized as a medical service only to be conducted by doctors because of the dangers of infection and other health-related reasons, but it is because of this categorization that there are no records of how many people get illegal tattoos, and the side effects or problems that follow.

The main reason why tattoo customers tend to go to tattoo parlors instead of doctors who perform tattoos is because of the level of artistry. Young people collect information on tattoos through the internet and develop high standards. There are around 1,000 tattoo-related online clubs in Korea through which people can get information such as sample pictures and information on who the best tattooists are (Kim, 2012).

**CHANGING ACCEPTANCE OF TATTOOS IN KOREAN SOCIETY**

A study in 1999 already found that artistic expression was a part of the tattoo process and even suggested tattoo art should be included in art education (Fedorenko et al., 1999: 105). Judging by the increase of young students and people with white-collar jobs getting tattoos, the artistic and decorative side of tattoos has grown in significance compared to the days when Korean gangs, also known as *jopok*, tattooed huge dragons or tigers on their backs and chests as a sign of power and for intimidation effects.

A study by Kosut claimed that the tattoos on a body communicate the identity of the wearer of the tattoo, and the culture in which the wearer lives (Kosut, 2000: 79). Most Korean people choose an animal tattoo or characters, as mentioned above, indicating that they use tattoos as a symbol of something like luck or power, or as an expression of self or what they believe in, or just as another way to look attractive.

Meanwhile, Fisher (2002: 91) states that tattooing is both physical and social, and can be seen as a form of resistance to a culture that commodifies the body, or at least a symptom of such a culture. This is also a relevant view, especially in Korea – a country where being part of a group and in harmony with others is considered a virtue based on traditional Confucian values. The younger generations are developing different values from their elders, and have a desire to be different and express their individuality (Ha and Park, 2011: 4). In extreme cases, even young people are using tattoos as a blatant form of resistance and intimidation, like *jopoks*. For example, in 2013, a 19-year-old who just got out of a detention center intimidated a younger friend into giving
him money by sending him a photo of a tattoo he got in the detention center (Chang, 2013). This is not something that might easily threaten a teenager in the United States or Europe, for example, but just seeing a photograph of a young man with a tattoo was scary enough to make someone send him money in Korea. Big tattoos and having tattoos at a young age still projects an intimidating image to Korean people.

However, the less intimidating form of tattoos that are simply a form of self-expression is more prevalent now. The social issue from the perspective of older generations is that the age of those tattooed is growing much younger, and more women are getting tattoos – something that is traditionally not looked kindly upon, in a country where young women were arrested for wearing miniskirts shorter than 15 cm above the knee up to 1988. Most customers at tattoo parlors at the Hongik University area or other well-known tattoo parlors are college students in their 20s, and more than 60 per cent are young women (Lee, 2013). However, a study on the experiences of college women with tattoos found that they experienced disapproval or mistreatment for being a tattooed female, and there was a connection between disapproval and the values of different generations and religions (Strohmenger, 2012). Furthermore, in recent years, even Korean middle school students have increasingly started to get tattoos, usually influenced by K-pop stars or actors they idolize, who have tattoos. Several owners of tattoo parlors in Seoul that illegally gave minors tattoos were arrested in 2013. In 2012, a tattooist of seven years revealed to the press that he was contacted around three to four times per week by minors who wanted tattoos. The desire of teens to get tattoos is also leading to an increase in teenage crime. As an example, teenagers were arrested for robbing a house so they could pay for tattoos costing around 500,000 to 600,000 Korean won (around US$500 to US$600) in 2012 (Lee, 2012).

Elders disapprove of the spread of tattoos among youth, but more and more young people are getting tattoos. While those with tattoos in the past had a tendency to get them where they could conceal them when necessary, such as on their upper arm or shoulder blade, increasingly more people like to show off their tattoos now, by getting them on areas like their hand, wrist or ankles. A generational gap surely exists, but the general trend seems to be moving towards more open tattoos, and people getting more used to seeing tattoos as a result.

FIELD RESEARCH

Field research was conducted in environments in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, where people with tattoos could be seen. The researcher took note of how many people had tattoos, what kinds of tattoos they had, how they showed off their tattoos, how they acted, and how others reacted. The goal of field research was observation in a natural setting, so those observed were not approached for interviews, and in-depth interviews were conducted separately with other subjects with tattoos, as presented below.
Based on a discussion with a group of five young people with tattoos, places in Seoul where people with tattoos were likely to be seen were selected. The places selected were an outdoor swimming pool in Itaewon, an area in Seoul where foreigners and ‘trendy’ young people like to hang out, and a lounge in the Hongik University area, which is a gathering place for those who like or perform music or art and have strong personalities.

The swimming pool in Itaewon was visited in August 2012, and the people at the pool were observed for six hours. The swimming pool has a capacity limit of 150 persons, and the pool was full on the day of the visit. There was a long line outside the pool and new people entered as customers left.

Around one quarter of the people at the pool appeared to have tattoos, whether small or covering the entire body. This is not typical of a Korean pool. The swimming pool at Itaewon is especially a place where not only those with tattoos, but all kinds of young people with strong personalities are drawn to because of its specific services and atmosphere. First, it is an outdoor pool on the fifth floor of a hotel in the middle of a busy shopping and bar area that attracts tourists, young people and foreigners. Swimmers can look over the balcony and see the trendy area at a glance. Second, there is a DJ booth where a DJ spins live, loud music and people are encouraged to dance. Third, there is a pub at the pool that sells beer and cocktails in addition to snacks. Fourth, the main demographic at the pool is young people between the ages of 20 and 35. Fifth, the place is famous for people with good figures going to show off their muscular physique or fit body, and even young people who do not feel like they have the perfect body do not feel comfortable going there.

Many different types of tattoos could be spotted, including small butterflies and roses on young women, and huge dragons or other animals on men. Chinese characters, Oriental pictures (Figure 1), a cross and English words could also be seen. Those with tattoos appeared to group together. In other words, if one person with large tattoos was spotted, the person was found to be part of a group of friends that all had large tattoos. There was rarely a group of people where just one person had a tattoo. A group either had no tattoos at all, or several or all people in a group had tattoos.

Perhaps because of the free atmosphere at the pool, none of the tattooed people attempted to hide their tattoos or seemed to care what others thought. In other situations in Korea, those with tattoos might be expected to wear a shirt to cover their tattoos. People with big tattoos are not even allowed in public baths, called mokyoktang. Mokyoktangs are a big part of Korean culture. Many people enjoy bathing in the big hot and cold baths and going in the sauna. They are used to this from a very young age as their parents start to take them when they are children. However, at the Itaewon swimming pool, the tattooed young people were free to show off their tattoos and even be very loud. Many were found screaming, running around, dancing and splashing others with water. None of the other swimmers appeared to be surprised by the tattoos, and nobody treated them any differently from those without
tattoos. In fact, those with tattoos and stronger tans appeared to be even more confident than the paler and quieter people who blended in and would be considered more 'acceptable' outside.

The lounge in the Hongik University area was visited in October 2012, and the people at the lounge were observed for four hours. There were around 70 people at the lounge, and around 15 people had easily visible tattoos. Not as many people with tattoos would be spotted at a regular restaurant or bar in a conservative neighborhood, but this lounge was a place that attracted people working in music, art or fashion.

The lounge had a young, free and laid-back atmosphere and nobody seemed to pay much attention to what others looked like or did. Some of the waiters had visible tattoos, such as a tattoo on their wrist or neck, and some had thick piercings on their ears, lips or eyebrows. The music was loud, the lighting was subtle and the seating was large sofas with cushions, creating a dark but relaxed atmosphere. Customers with tattoos had tattoos on their arms, wrists, shoulders or breasts.

The types of tattoos spotted were Chinese characters, simple shapes like a star or musical notes, animals, and foreign languages. The tendency for those with tattoos to belong to a group with tattoos was not apparent at the lounge, but this may be because some had tattoos that were covered by their clothing.

Just like the swimming pool, those with tattoos at the lounge did not seem to hide their tattoos. In fact, one group of people was showing off their hidden tattoos to each other and talking about who had nice tattoos. Some tattoos were not visible because they were under their clothing, but they did not appear to intentionally hide their tattoos. One person was heard saying he liked the idea of having a tattoo not everyone could see. Other customers at the lounge did not seem to care that there were people with tattoos there and even serving them. The crowd at the lounge was generally a very fashionable and young crowd, and did not appear to be conservative at all.
The two field studies show the growing acceptance of tattoos among younger generations. Young Koreans who are sensitive to trends and being ‘hip’ appear to have a positive view on expression of individuality and being different, including through tattoos.

INTERVIEWS
Ten interview subjects were selected using the purposive sampling method, where participants are grouped according to preselected criteria relevant to the research question. For this study, Koreans in their 20s and 30s with tattoos were grouped. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 10 tattooed subjects – seven men between the ages of 24 and 33, and three women between the ages of 25 and 34. Two of the men were college students, one was a hockey player, one was a partner at an event company, and the remaining three worked in the popular music industry. One of the women was a college student, one was a translator and interpreter, and one worked in the popular music industry. Their monthly income varied from 400,000 Korean won (around US$400) to 4,000,000 Korean won (around US$4,000), and their level of education varied to include high-school graduates, university dropouts and university graduates. The interviews were conducted individually from December 2012 to January 2013, and each interview lasted around 60 minutes. The experiences of the subjects were transcribed and the data was analyzed using the Strauss and Corbin (1990: 13) coding method to identify prominent themes among participants. The coding paradigm included categories related to: (1) the phenomenon under study: tattoos; (2) the conditions related to the phenomenon: why the subjects got tattoos and what the tattoos mean; (3) the actions and strategies for handling the phenomenon: how they planned and decided on their tattoo and where they got it done; and (4) the consequences of the actions related to the phenomenon: what they thought of their tattoo afterwards and the reactions they got from others.

Although most tattoo and fashion experts agree that tattoos and munshins are not the same thing, all those interviewed said they thought they were basically the same. Six of the subjects said they were the same thing, and it was just a difference of English and Korean, while four of the subjects said they were the same but nobody really used the word munshin anymore. They said munshin was more associated with jopok, and young people now use the word tattoo when they talk about their fashionable tattoos, even when they speak in Korean. When asked about the significance of tattoos, all those interviewed said they thought tattoos had some kind of significance. Some people said tattoos were a sign of personal faith or values, while other said they were symbols of memories or significant times in their lives, and others said the significance was different for different people. None believed people got tattoos without any meaning. All those interviewed said they thought people with tattoos had strong personalities and opinions and wanted to express themselves, and six of the interviewees added that they thought people with tattoos were generally
artistic. Four of the subjects interviewed belonged to a group of close friends who all had tattoos, and when asked what percentage of people in Korea and in Seoul specifically they thought had tattoos, they answered between 5 to 10 per cent in Korea and around 30 to 35 per cent in Seoul. However, one of the subjects lived in Incheon, a city close to Seoul but more rural than the capital city, and he said he felt like 0.5 per cent of Koreans had tattoos and probably 1 per cent of people in Seoul had tattoos. Thus, people surrounded by other people with tattoos felt more comfortable and part of a group, and that they were growing more acceptable in Korean society, while the subject who had hardly any people around him with tattoos felt more isolated and different.

It is not uncommon for teenagers to get tattoos in the United States or Europe, for example, but only two of the subjects interviewed for this study got their first tattoos as teenagers – both when they were 19 years old. Two subjects got their first tattoo in their 30s, and the rest got them in their 20s. Korean teenagers do not have as much freedom to express their individuality as teenagers in other countries, because high-school students are expected to focus on the university entrance exam full time, and many schools have appearance restrictions such as a hair-length limit, no hair coloring, no jewelry, etc. Even outside of school, students who wear makeup or style their hair with products are frowned upon in Korean society, so young people usually start experimenting with fashion and self-expression in their 20s (Park, 2013: 167). This explains why most of the subjects waited until their 20s to get a tattoo. One of the two subjects who got tattoos during their teenage years lived in Canada at the time, so only one of the subjects actually got a tattoo in Korea before reaching 20. No significant relation was found between income or education level and when or where the subjects got their tattoos.

A 2004 study found that people decide to get a tattoo because of a lifestyle choice or to record a precise time. Themes related to death and devotion represented a method of dealing with personal trauma, and tattoos were sometimes an expression of an ideal the wearer of the tattoo pursued (Theodora, 2004). Another study conducted in 2004 categorized the meaning behind getting a tattoo into ‘information search,’ ‘approval,’ ‘interpersonal skills,’ ‘trust building and mutual involvement,’ ‘becoming a collector’ and ‘developing a sense of loyalty’ (Goulding et al., 2004: 280–283). This study showed that there were diverse reasons for getting a tattoo, including some of the reasons above, but they were all linked to self-expression. One 24-year-old male interviewee said he got his first and only tattoo during a trip to Argentina because a friend said he should get one. The young man, who got his first tattoo when he was 19 years old, said he just got it because he thought it looked nice. Others had reasons such as wanting to express their faith. One 33-year-old woman said she got her first tattoo two years ago because she befriended a tattooist and could get one for free. This woman had a steady income and could afford a tattoo, so she says the fact that she could get one for free was more of a justification and the last push she needed, rather than
a decisive financial element. All the opinions expressed by subjects led to
the conclusion that they thought it looked nice, and wanted to look differ-
ent and special. Some of the subjects said their tattoo had a meaning, such
as their life motto or expression of their religious beliefs or passion, while
others said they just chose something that would look nice and suited them.
This confirmed that people ultimately wanted to look nice and tattoos were
in some way a kind of accessory to beautify their body. One 25-year-old man
explained his reasons for getting decorative tattoos (see Figure 2):

I have two tattoos – an angel and a star. Some people say my tattoos
are unexpected because I am a man and I look quite masculine, too. I
decided on them by talking continuously with my tattooist and think-
ing hard about what would suit me. They don’t have a special meaning,
but I think they suit me because they are contrasting with my personal
image. The themes are soft, but the tattoos are strong. It’s interesting
and looks good.

A study in 2012 suggested that people get tattoos to leave symbols of
thought on the human canvas, or as a result of seeking new ways to display
their fitness (Carmen et al., 2012: 134). Expressions of thought or belief were
also found in this study, expressed both in the form of words and symbols. A
33-year-old male subject said:

My tattoo says ‘Play until the whistle is blown.’ I was watching a soccer
game one day. It was a tough game but the players kept on playing and

Figure 2. An angel tattoo on the arm of a 25-year-old man. © Photograph: Judy Park.
giving their all to the end. I thought this was a really good life lesson and that's when I wrote it down. I finally decided to get a tattoo a year later, and I decided this was what I wanted.

Another 32-year-old man had a tattoo of a cross on his arm as a symbol of his faith:

I guess you would say I'm a newborn Christian. I went to church as a child, but Korea was very conservative back then and my bible study teacher used to hit me for wearing baggy pants or earrings to church. I stopped going. I thought people who are cool and look good did not belong at church. Then, my friend encouraged me to go to church with him again seven years ago. I was so surprised. The congregation was young and hip. I saw people with distinct looks being accepted and welcomed. I spotted a man with a cross tattoo, and thought it was really cool. I gradually met Jesus again, and got a cross tattoo myself to remind me of my faith and express it proudly to others.

The cross tattoo, however, was also a fashionable element for the wearer, as he is a rapper and freelances as a photographer for the fashion scene. His high interest in fashion affected his decision to get a tattoo.

None of the subjects interviewed got a tattoo impulsively. They thought about it for a long time, and planned the occasion. Only two of the subjects interviewed got their tattoos in Korea, while the remaining eight got their tattoos overseas. Those who got them in Korea were the woman who got her tattoos from her tattooist friend, and the young man who talked with his tattooist for a long time before getting decorative tattoos. The former got her tattoo in Itaewon, and the latter got his at a tattoo parlor in the Hongik University area.

The rest of the subjects got at least one of their tattoos overseas — in Canada, the United States, Argentina and Thailand. Only one subject said he thought about getting a tattoo after he saw the many skilled and inexpensive tattoo parlors in Thailand when he went there on a long vacation. Even then, he thought about it for a few weeks before he got his first tattoo. The rest of the interviewees said they had wanted a tattoo for a long time, and only got it done overseas because they believed foreign tattooists with more experience were more skilled:

I got my tattoo at Khaosan, a tourist area in Bangkok, Thailand. I got it done there because I have a lot of friends who got their tattoos in Thailand and they all turned out great. It's also very cheap in Thailand. I only paid 3,000 baht for something that would have cost me at least three times that in Korea.

Another subject, who had tattoos from both Thailand and Korea, said he preferred Thailand in the past because there were no good tattooists in Korea a few years ago. He said that there were skilled tattooists now, but it
was more expensive and the tattooists did not provide friendly services like Thailand:

There aren't many famous tattooists in Korea, so the ones that are really good are arrogant. They will say that they are really expensive because they are good … Like, take it or leave it.

The favorite body part for getting a tattoo among the interview subjects was the arm. Five of the seven men had a tattoo on their upper arm, though none of the women did, confirming that men have a higher tendency than women to get tattoos on areas they can easily reveal. One woman had a tattoo on her breast and wrist, and another had a tattoo on her hand and calf. One of the two men who did not have a tattoo on the arm had one at the back of his neck (Figure 3), and the other had one on his back.

Those who had a tattoo on the arms or legs intended to show off their tattoos, although one man did mention that it was better to have a tattoo on the upper arm than the lower arm because you could cover it with a t-shirt in the summer, too, if necessary. He did not find the need to cover it any more, but he did just 10 years ago, when he was still in college and not many people in Korea had tattoos:

I was living at my friend's house with my friend's parents during college. They are family friends, and since my parents live in Canada, they sent me to live with this family. I already had a tattoo, and I liked to show it off at school or if I went out with my friends, but I always had a shirt on at home because I did not want to scare my friend's parents. They probably still don't know I have tattoos on my arm and back.

All the subjects agreed that they generally did not feel the need to hide their tattoo any more, especially when they were out with friends. However, some did mention circumstances where they would attempt to hide their tattoo. The 34-year-old woman with a tattoo on her hand worked as a translator and interpreter. She said she was allowed to show her tattoos at work, but she covered her hand with makeup if she had to meet clients outside for

Figure 3. A tattoo on the back of a young man's neck. © Photograph: Judy Park.
interpretation jobs. The 25-year-old man living in Incheon said he tried to keep his arms covered even when going to school because nobody on campus had tattoos, and sometimes professors seemed to treat him differently after seeing his tattoos. In other words, the more educated subjects with white-collar or close to white-collar backgrounds were more aware of how others viewed them in formal or professional settings. They liked their tattoos just as much as the subjects with freer jobs in music or sports, and wanted to show off their tattoos in their personal time, but they naturally accepted concealment of their tattoos if the circumstances required it.

The subject who lived with family friends during college, and the subject who lived in Incheon said they thought people generally had a negative reaction to their tattoos, but the rest of the subjects thought they got positive responses from people. Everyone agreed that their close friends and people in similar industries especially reacted positively, and older generations did not. All of the subjects expressed that they thought it was wrong that only doctors were legally allowed to tattoo in Korea:

It does not make sense. Doctors can’t draw. People want tattoos to look beautiful and decorate themselves. I think someone who majored in art or studied tattoos specifically should be tattooists. People are going to get tattoos anyway. We should just have a system where the properly trained people can get a license.

Regarding the recent issue of middle-school students getting tattoos in Korea, none of the interviewees thought it was a problem. There were differences in the degree of support they expressed, but they were all generally for teenagers getting tattoos if they want to. Three of the subjects said teenagers should be allowed to as long as they know they have to live with their choice, and the other four said they did not see a problem with it at all, and they hoped it would become legal for teenagers to get tattoos.

None of the subjects regretted getting a tattoo, although two people said they had hoped it would turn out better. One subject actually tattooed a new tattoo over an existing tattoo because he did not like the result. When asked if they would recommend getting a tattoo to friends, a girlfriend or boyfriend, there were mixed results. Some said they would absolutely recommend it, and one man even said he wanted to get a matching tattoo with his future spouse, while a few subjects said they would not urge someone to get one, because they wanted to respect the choice of others. When asked if they would support their future children if they wanted to get tattoos, all the subjects said they would.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

An examination of the visual effects of tattoos can help understand the message of young people’s tattoos and how tattoos are perceived and accepted in
Korean society. Rose (2007) claimed that an image has its own visual effects, but the effects always intersect with the social context in which the visual is viewed and the audience. Rose’s visual interpretative framework was used to analyze Figures 2 and 3 as examples of young Koreans’ tattoos. Rose divides the sites at which meanings of an image are made into three sites in particular: the sites of production, the image itself, and its audiences. She also suggests that three modalities – technological, composition and social – exist in all of the three sites, which contribute to interpretation of images (pp. 16–17).

**Production**

The technology used at the first site of production is the same for both of the visuals in Figures 2 and 3. They are tattoos done by hand, and the wearers of the tattoos said they considered tattoos to be a form of art. The technology of a tattoo also means the visuals were planned in advance. The design shown in Figure 2 was chosen by the wearer out of numerous visuals at the tattoo parlor, and the process of selection added significance to the visuals as a statement chosen by the wearer. The wearer of the angel tattoo said he chose the visual because it was unexpected. The wearer is trying to make a statement of double-sidedness and unexpected soft character through the tattoo. The wearer of the tattoo in Figure 3 searched the internet for the visual he wanted and showed it to the tattooist at the tattoo parlor, who copied the visual. It means ‘and’, and is an expression of the wearer’s belief that a person’s future is left blank and can be written any way he or she wants. The space on either side of the tattoo on the neck signifies a blank space.

In terms of compositionality, an image can be categorized into a certain genre. Both are black and white tattoos. Figure 2 can be categorized as an ‘angel tattoo’, and Figure 3 can be categorized as ‘words/characters’. Angel tattoos are usually chosen as a method of expressing love, purity or beauty. A big tattoo, like the one shown in Figure 2, may seem intimidating at first, but the aim is not to intimidate. It is to express something soft and kind, as mentioned by the wearer above. Tattoos of words or characters use language to directly express a belief or statement. The interesting thing is that although not always the case, most people seem to prefer a foreign language or a sort of code instead of tattooing words in their mother tongue. The wearer of the tattoo in Figure 3 said he chose a foreign language because first of all, he had never seen a tattoo in Korean and thought tattooing Korean words would seem too obvious and immature, and second, he wanted to send a message, but also make people wonder what the message meant.

The social modality of the production of tattoos is the general understanding of tattoos in Korea. Not many doctors perform tattoos, so most of the tattoos seen on young people are illegal and many people are aware of this fact. This makes the visual have a mysterious, rebellious and daring image.
Image

The technology of the images shown in the two figures is both tattoos with black and white tonalities. There can be many reasons for choosing a black and white image, such as cost or style. Interviews with the wearers revealed that they both chose a black and white image mainly because of their preference for the black and white style. The wearer in Figure 2 said that money was not an issue when it comes to tattoos, and he would have chosen a color tattoo if he thought it would suit him better. However, he thought a black and white image would look good and would be something he could see every day and not get sick of. The wearer in Figure 3 said he could not imagine getting the characters on his neck in color as it would seem to 'girly'.

The compositionality of the image in the case of tattoos is inevitably linked to the position of the tattoo and its wearer. The angel in Figure 2 is on the forearm of the wearer so the wearer can see it whenever he wants to. The angel appears to be singing or giving a blessing, as if it is guarding the wearer. The wearer said it makes him feel peaceful when he sees it on his arm when he is feeling down or angry. The wearer in Figure 3 said he cannot see his tattoo unless he looks in the mirror, but he knows that other people can see it easily, and that makes him more conscious of the message. He feels like he has to work and live harder, since he is sending out a message of a hopeful future based on will and effort. He also thinks it is fun and unexpected because when people see his face, they do not expect him to have a tattoo.

The social component of these images is linked to the social status and position of the wearers. The wearers are both university students in Korea who have completed their mandatory military service and are thinking of graduating and getting a job within the next two years. They have an urge to enjoy their college years and the little time they have left before they get full-time jobs in the 'adult' world, but they are also preparing themselves for the adult world. This is one reason why the tattoos are in places that can be covered easily with clothing if desired. The tattoo in Figure 2 can be covered with long sleeves, and the tattoo in Figure 3 can be covered with a collared shirt.

Audiences

The technology used to create an image can have an effect on the audience's reaction (Rose, 2007: 25). The angel tattoo in Figure 2, for example, does not look as angelic as it might if the same image were on the stained glass of a cathedral or painted on canvas. A person may just skim across the simple letters in Figure 3 if they were in a book, but the tattoo on the back of the neck here makes the audience wonder what it means and want to know more about the wearer.

As for compositionality from the audience's point of view, where the tattoo is viewed, thus in what context they see the wearer, may have a big influence on their reaction of the visual, and the wearer himself may have an effect,
too. For example, if the audience sees the wearer of Figure 2 with his tattoo working hard on an art project at school, they might think the wearer is an artistic person who expresses himself strongly, but if they see the wearer and his tattoo smoking a cigarette on the street on a weekday, they might think he is an unemployed young man with no bright future ahead of him. The audience may also focus on the wearer’s arm, muscles or face because of the tattoo instead of the image of the tattoo itself. It can be recognized as more of an accessory or part of the wearer than a visual in itself.

There are two social aspects to the audience of a visual – the social practice of viewing and the social identity of the audience (Rose, 2007: 27). The first aspect is how people accept tattoos in Korea. Although more and more people are finding tattoos to be acceptable, partly because of the increased exposure of tattoos, they are still linked to negative associations such as being anti-social or rebellious. The second aspect, however, makes the reactions of the audiences different according to their own identity. Through interviews with the wearers, it was confirmed that close friends or people from similar social groups liked their tattoos, but older generations did not. Generally, younger people and classmates at school thought the tattoos were ‘cool’, and professors, parents and the general public seemed not to approve.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

An increasing number of young people in Korea are getting tattoos in recent years. Those who had to cover up their tattoos or be treated like criminals now proudly flaunt decorative tattoos on different parts of the body. The results show that young people are getting tattoos mainly to look good and express their individuality. Many reasons are included for getting a tattoo, such as marking one’s thoughts or beliefs or recording a change in one’s life, but some of the reasons for tattoos found in preceding studies in other countries, such as ‘information search’ or ‘trust building and mutual involvement’ were not discovered in this study. This may be because there is a short history of current day ‘tattoos’ as opposed to ‘munshins’ of the past, and therefore young people are more focused on appearance as of yet. ‘Trust building and mutual involvement’ may rather be seen as a reason for *jopoks* to get tattoos, but the small sample used in this study did not reveal the same reason for younger generations.

The changing tattoo trends such as higher focus on decoration and fashion, getting tattoos on more visible body parts, people getting tattoos at a younger age, and young men in particular getting bolder, bigger tattoos even though they are not part of a gang, indicate that Korean society is definitely changing. The younger generations are leading the change, similarly to the younger generations of the Western world in the 1960s, and although the older generations may not approve, they are inevitably getting used to the change due to increased exposure. The changes in tattoo trends reflect that younger
generations have a higher interest in appearance and expression of individuality, and do not want to conform like their parents’ generation did. They also reflect that while older generations were expected to be obedient and study until high-school graduation, younger generations want to start experimenting and finding themselves earlier on. Being part of a group and fitting in with society is traditionally considered a virtue in the Confucianism-based Korean society, but some youth appear to want to make an effort to do the opposite through their big, daring tattoos.

However, though Korean youth appear to be accepting cultural exchange and diffusion of Western cultures to Korea as a natural part of life and globalization, unlike their parents’ generation, who remember living in a closed society that had strict regulations against the introduction of foreign culture, and becoming more and more similar to younger generations in Western countries like the United States, a lack of depth was observed in their tattoo culture. Many people with tattoos in Western countries enjoy getting tattoos with some kind of meaning, like the faces or birth dates of their family, a symbol of being part of a group, or other patterns that are significant to them. Meanwhile, most of the Korean people with tattoos observed and interviewed in this study prioritized decoration and looking good over significance. This may be because the new ‘Westernized’ tattoo culture has a short history in Korea and people have not yet caught up with the significance part of Western tattoos, or it may be a reflection of a characteristic of Korean society that is highly focused on appearance. Korea is very well known for a sudden rapid increase in cosmetic surgery, especially for facial surgery to make the eyes wider, nose narrower, and the chin more v-shaped, and there are even cosmetic surgery tour packages to the country that Asian tourists from countries like Japan and China use to take advantage of the comparatively cheaper and highly advanced cosmetic surgery of Korea (Seo, 2004: 128). Korean youth today thus find themselves stuck in a dilemma between wanting to pursue and express individuality like the outspoken young European or American people they see through the internet or TV, and wanting to follow the latest trends. It can be analyzed that Korean youth are actually conforming to the individualization trend. There are even trends in cosmetic surgery. For example, big, round, cute eyes are considered passé and young women now opt for surgery that elongates their eyes. Most people also prefer ‘petit cosmetic surgery’ such as fillers and injections for a more natural look rather than inserting silicon in their face or body. The desire to keep up with global trends is linked to the attitudes of Korean people about modernity. Being modern and up to date is important and a new virtue for the young. While in Japan, you can easily see a young person dressed in a kimono on the street, either as daily wear or for a special occasion, it is very difficult to see a young Korean person wearing a traditional hanbok on the street. Young Korean people generally have less appreciation for old traditions and are more focused on being modern and future-oriented. This may
be due to the focus of Korean society on development, which has continued since its rapid industrial and economic development since the 1980s, and the society’s success in modern fields such as IT and semiconductors, which has made modernity a part of the country’s proud new identity.

The places selected for field observation of tattoos were ‘trendy’ and ‘artistic’ spots in Seoul, and most of the subjects interviewed for the study were in what is generally considered artistic fields. This indicates that those who work in such fields or who are committed to an artistic lifestyle in particular have a strong desire to get tattoos as a form of self-expression, as well as the freedom to do so. It can be predicted that tattoos will probably spread to a wider range of young people in the future, however, since Korean youth are highly influenced by pop culture. After all, K-pop culture is partly responsible for the heightened interest of teenagers in tattoos, as mentioned above. Trends, or yuhaeng, in Korean, take on a life of their own in Korea, perhaps due to the strongly rooted groupist culture, and there have been many cases where a new fashion statement started out as a form of expression of strong individuality, but ended up spreading vastly as copycats caught on. For example, dying hair blonde, wearing colored contact lenses or getting a navel piercing were all very daring looks worn by a select few at first, but as it gradually spread and became accepted, even young bookworm college students dedicated to their studies, or mobeomsaeng, were trying out these looks. There is a chance that tattoos will also spread and eventually be accepted as a way of making oneself up, too.

In some respects, tattoos can be seen as a tool young people use to succeed in contemporary society. The times are changing in Korea. The country has achieved great economic development and young people now enjoy more luxuries than ever before, including more money, trips overseas, access to the internet, and exposure to foreign luxury brands and trends. The other side of the coin is that they live in a society that is more competitive than ever, too. Youth today will probably not spend their entire life at one stable job like their parents did. They have to work hard to be the best, not just the best they can be, and they have to compete with global competitors, too. The changing times affect the desire of youth to express themselves more. It is hard to become number one if you just blend in with the crowd. In fact, Korean parents who used to focus on sending their children to top universities so they can get a good job and settle down are now more focused on education that helps discover their children’s interests and talents. Today, entertainers, songwriters and authors can make much more money than the traditional elite with white-collar jobs, and many people dream of working in a creative field and making it big. So Korean youth with tattoos are not necessarily delinquents with a rebellious mind, but often creative people who want to be different and make their mark in Korean society and the world.

It can be concluded that tattoos on the bodies of youth in Korea are not necessarily a sign of trouble, as some older generations may think, but a fashion statement, expression of self, and a sign of social change, from conformity
to individuality, or perhaps another form of conformity that is disguised as individuality, from modesty to a high interest in appearance, and from working together to having to compete with one another. If tattoos spread far and wide in Korea in the future, and if tattoos are legalized for tattooists without a medical license, for instance, it could indicate that Korean society as a whole is accepting freer values that respect the diverse choices and expressions of individuals, and aspects of a global culture that were not easily accepted before, but so far, the phenomenon is a sign of experimentation and transition. It is worth watching how this act of decorating the body will advance or wither in Korea, as a hint to the changing direction of Korean values, and consumer trends and characteristics.

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