

From Stigma to Signal: How Brands Featuring Tattoos Can Positively Influence Consumer Attitudes

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Abstract

Consumers often use marketplace offerings to express their identity, and tattoos are especially powerful because they are both visible and enduring. Although research has explored how tattoos shape impressions of workers and service providers, little is known about how tattoo display functions within advertising. We argue that tattoos in ads act as symbolic cues that the brand affirms and supports personal self-expression leading to increased attitudes and marketing effectiveness. In three preregistered studies ($N \approx 1,000$), we establish tattoos' perceived position in the broader landscape of body modifications and examine their downstream effects on attitudes and marketing effectiveness. Including tattoos in ads increases positive evaluations of both the model and the brand, independent of demographics or participants' own tattoo status. Tattoos also boost marketing effectiveness through perceived brand support for self-expression, indicating that tattoos in advertising improve outcomes not because they make the model seem cooler, but because they signal that the brand endorses customers' individuality and authentic self-expressions.

Track: Consumer Behaviour