

TATTOO TELEVISION: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF MIAMI INK VIA  
NARRATIVE PARADIGM THEORY

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Abstract

We are witness to a dramatic shift in cultural acceptance of tattoos. The first American Television program on tattoos, *Miami Ink*, is a distinct and substantial marker reflecting this current cultural shift in tattoo acceptance. Studying the narrative themes within *Miami Ink* can then serve as a reflection of cultural views when it first aired. Specifically, this analysis will examine the themes presented in the show and what they accomplish in terms of meaning.

*Keywords:* tattoo, television, stigma, stereotypes, narrative paradigm theory

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The TLC network reality series, *Miami Ink*, is the first American reality television series about a tattoo parlor, and the first show completely devoted to tattoos (Hibberd, 2005)<sup>1</sup>. The show closely follows four tattoo artists' journey into starting a tattoo studio and the clientele they tattoo in South Beach, Florida. The tattoo artists engage each client in conversation as to their personal reasons for getting a tattoo. In addition, the show highlights the intricate and inspiring tattoos the artists create on their clients.

*Miami Ink* was first broadcast on television in 2005 and ran till 2008 (Saraiya, 2014). The show is in syndication and continues to air worldwide ('Miami Ink' Comes to Fuse on Sunday, 2015; Tattoodo, 2015, 2014; Thobo-Carlsen & Chateaubriand, 2014). *Miami Ink* averaged 1.2 million viewers during its first season on the TLC network (Azote, 2005; Crupi, 2005). The TLC network's targeted audience demographic was adults ages 18 to 54. The median age of the adult viewer of the program was 33 years of age (Azote, 2005).

*Miami Ink* was the first tattoo reality show in America and kick-started the tattoo-show subgenre known today (Paige, 2015; Saraiya, 2014). Similar spin-off tattoo reality shows soon followed including LA Ink [TLC Network, 2007-2011], London Ink [TLC Network, 2007-2007], NY Ink [TLC Network, 2011-2013], and Ink Master [Spike Network, 2012-Present] (Saraiya, 2014; Thobo-Carlsen & Chateaubriand, 2014). It is worthy to note that the shows LA Ink, NY Ink, and Ink Master all feature tattoo artists who starred in *Miami Ink*.

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<sup>1</sup>*Miami Ink* premiered on the TLC Network on Tuesday July 19, 2005. The following day on July 20<sup>th</sup> the competing show *Inked* was premiered on the A & E Network (Hibberd, 2005; Oldenburg, 2005).

### **Relevance for Studying the Topic**

The state of Oklahoma was the last state in the nation to legalize tattooing in the year 2006 (Associated Press, 2006). As tattoos are becoming more acceptable in American society, one is now able to see tattoos on individuals from all walks of life. Research into this phenomenon has attributed this rise of acceptance to open communication from the tattoo industry and positive media exposure of tattoos with celebrities, musicians, and professional athletes (DeMello, 2000). With these media influences helping advance the popularity of tattoos, it is then relevant to look closely at the first television show dedicated specifically to tattooing.

We are witness to a dramatic shift in cultural acceptance of tattoos. The first American Television program on tattoos, *Miami Ink*, is a distinct and substantial marker reflecting this current cultural shift in tattoo acceptance. Studying the narrative themes within *Miami Ink* can then serve as a reflection of cultural views when it first aired.

Conducting a rhetorical analysis of *Miami Ink* will serve as a basis from which an improved understanding of tattoos through communication can develop. Specifically, this analysis will examine the themes presented in the show and what they accomplish in terms of meaning.

The anticipated applications of results are to add greater understanding of how the wearing of tattoos has increased in popularity despite continued stigma from society. Examination of recurring themes found in the tattoo narratives will lend itself to the understanding of some of the many reasons people choose to be tattooed. An analysis of the tattoo narratives will be beneficial to those studying tattooed individuals. Findings may also prove helpful to researchers looking at depictions of tattoos in television

programming. For the tattooing community, this analysis will be of benefit by presenting further dialog and understanding about some of the reasons why people choose to be tattooed. To better understand the topical messages of *Miami Ink*, an understanding must be formed of the use of tattoos throughout humanity's history, their expansion into American culture, and the stigma associated with them.

### **History**

Tattooing has been practiced since the Stone Age and is the most ancient and widely practiced form of permanent body alteration in the world (Green, 2005; Levin, 2008; Levy, 2008; Porterfield, 2008). The oldest evidence for tattooing has been discoveries of 40,000 year old bone needles and hollow bone tubes, with traces of powdered pigments, believed to be used for tattooing (Levy, 2008).

Ancient societies used tattoos to serve several purposes. Reasons included religious devotion, a form of therapy or protection, to show one's status and affiliation with a particular tribe or group, to indicate bravery and frighten enemies in battle, and to indicate maturity for marriage (Gustafson, 2000; Levin, 2008; Levy, 2008; Porterfield, 2008; Sanders, 1990; Surles, 2008; Wyatt, 2003).

Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations utilized tattoos as marks of shame and disgrace. Popular tattooing practices were to tattoo slaves and criminals. The Greek word for tattoo "sigmates" gives us the word "stigma" as something that sets apart and is disgraceful (Levin, 2008, p. 19). Slaves that tried to escape the Roman authorities were tattooed on their foreheads with the letters F.U.G., short for the Latin word for fugitive.

This practice of tattooing slaves and criminals continued within the Roman military until the third century when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity

and banned all tattooing of the face in 325 ACE. Constantine believed that tattooing of the face violated God's handiwork (Fisher, 2002; Jennings, 1997; Sanders, 1990).

Constantine held the belief that a man's face was made in the image of God. Because of this, he suggested to his soldiers that only the hands and calves of criminals and slaves be tattooed (Fisher, 2002).

The history of western tattooing starts in the mid-18th century with the exploratory English voyages of Captain (then Lieutenant) James Cook and his encounters with the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific (Gilbert, 2001; Sanders, 1988, 1990). On April 11, 1769, Captain Cook and his crew reached Matavia Bay in Tahiti. Hundreds of tattooed islanders came out to welcome him and his crew. In their three-month stay in Tahiti, Cook and his crew observed and participated in the natives' cultural and tattooing practices (Gilbert, 2001; Porterfield, 2008).

The tales of Captain Cook and his crew, with their tattoos and adventures with exotic cultures, fascinated the British royalty and upper classes. As a result they became sought after guests at stylish dinner parties. Tattoos soon came into fashion and quickly spread through the upper classes of Europe. Members of the royal family and aristocracy were getting tattoos of their own including King Harold II of England, King George II of Greece, King Oscar of Sweden, King Frederick IX of Denmark, King Alfonso of Spain, and Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany (Gilbert, 2000; Green, 2005; Levy, 2008; Sanders, 1990).

One of the first references to the tattoo practice in America was during the American Civil War (Fisher, 2002). Martin Hildebrandt is credited with tattooing thousands of both Confederate and Union forces during the Civil War (Sanders, 1990).

American tattooing development and popularity continued to stay unassuming until the development of the electric tattoo machine in 1891 (Fisher, 2002; Gilbert, 2001; Hemingson, 2009; Von D, 2009).

The inventor was New York City tattooist Sam O'Reilly<sup>2</sup> (Levy, 2008; Porterfield, 2008; Reardon, 2008). Basing his design on Thomas Edison's 1876 electric stencil pen patent, O'Reilly called his new device the "tattaugraph" (Fisher, 2002). The advent of the electric tattoo machine no longer required tattoos to be done by hand. This quickened the tattooing process, decreased the pain involved and allowed for greater detail towards making the designs (Fisher, 2002; Levy, 2008; Sanders, 1990).

The development of the electric tattoo machine changed the practice and market for tattoos (Levy, 2008). As the electric tattoo machine made tattooing easier and faster, it also became less expensive, which attracted customers from the working-classes of the United States and England<sup>3</sup>. This development eventually caused tattoos to fall out of favor with royalty and the upper class (Levy, 2008).

During this shift in the tattoo market negative associations were attributed to tattooing (Levy, 2008). Those in the middle class viewed tattoos as a product distributed by unskilled enthusiasts practicing in bad neighborhoods to the dangerous margins of society (DeMello, 2000; Sanders, 1988, 1990). In North America, the tattoo profession quietly existed in small spaces hidden away in dirty corners of arcades, under circus tents, and carnival midways in the early twentieth-century (DeMello, 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to inventing the tattoo machine O'Reilly is also credited with introducing Japanese-style tattoo designs to America (Fisher, 2002; Sanders, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Sam O'Reilly shared his invention with his cousin in London, Tom Riley. Tom Riley became the first British tattoo artist to use the machine and one of the most prominent tattoo artists in England (Gilbert, 2001).

Tattoo parlors were often in seedy parts of cities where respectable citizens did not frequent. Sanitary measures had not been developed and customers often risked infection and disease from unclean needles and ink. Those whose lifestyles were outside the mainstream made up a large portion of tattooists' customers. Such people included criminals, gang members, and people who became featured attractions in side-shows and carnivals (Levy, 2008).

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, interest in the circus 'freak show' spectacle added to the upsurge in tattooists' business. Heavily tattooed performers would be put on display for onlookers and were paid up to two hundred dollars a week (Jennings, 1997). For over seventy years every major circus company employed tattooed side-show performers (Gilbert, 2001).

In the 1880s, tattooed women started to perform (DeMello, 2000). Tattooed women performers felt pressure to wear more revealing costumes to show how much of their bodies were actually tattooed. As a result, their outfits became smaller and tighter. Such a "peep-show" soon made tattoos synonymous with crudeness, promiscuity, and deviance in the public mindset (Fisher, 2002).

Within this time period of society viewing tattoos as undesirable, tattoos did find an audience with World War I and World War II Military and Navy service members. Tattoos served to memorialize their active duty service and as a form of personal identity (McCallion, 2007). The counter culture of the 1960's enjoyed a brief renaissance in tattoos (Fisher, 2002; Ritz, 2005; Sanders, 1988, 1990). However, it was not until the mid 1980's that society's negative association with tattoos began to shift. This watershed moment was started by the work of Sailor Jerry in the 1970's (Levin, 2008).

Sailor Jerry, born Norman Keith Collins, was a former sailor turned tattoo artist and operated a tattoo parlor in Honolulu, Hawaii. His most important contribution to the tattooing arts was his development of consistent safety and health standards. He was one of the first to use and promote single-service needles and inks that would be used for one customer only and then thrown away, and was also one of the first to sterilize his equipment. These sanitary changes from earlier methods helped prevent the spread of infectious diseases (Levy, 2008).

At the time when other tattooists were working in seclusion from one another, Sailor Jerry worked to help create an international network of artists to share ideas and techniques. All of his efforts coalesced in 1972 with his organization of the first international tattoo convention; the first of many and a major catalyst for the industry's boom starting in the 1980's (Levy, 2008).

American children today are growing up in a cultural landscape that is more tattoo conscious than any other time in history (Kosut, 2006). Studies have reported that at least twenty percent of the American population has a tattoo (Kosut, 2006; Mayers, Judelson, Moriarty, & Rundell, 2002). The Pew Research Center reported that of young Americans, ages 18-25, thirty-six percent had a tattoo (Pew Research Center, 2008). What has attributed to this cultural rise in popularity of tattoos is the increased coverage of tattoos in print and television media (DeMello, 2000; Wyatt, 2003; Yamada, 2009).

Western society's attitude toward tattoos has been repositioned back and forth over the last few centuries (Levy, 2008). Although tattooing is ancient, it has just recently begun to rise in public popularity as Western society's attitude toward tattoos is shifting (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004; Levy, 2008). No longer are tattoos solely for the



skin of the blue-collar working class, bikers, gang members, criminals or miscreants. People from all walks of life are now getting tattoos (Org, 2003; Porterfield, 2008; Reardon, 2008; Roleff, 2007; Trebay, 2008; Victionary, 2007). As Gustafson (2000) indicates, “We are witnesses to a tattoo revival. We see bodies emblazoned with [tattoos] everywhere, it seems, in our media-saturated society” (p. 17).

In response to the growing popularity of tattoos among their employees some businesses, including Ford Motor Company, Target, and the US Postal Service, now permit their employees to display their tattoos as long as they are not offensive (Org, 2003; Roleff, 2007). However, despite this growing rise in acceptance of tattoos by many, visible tattoos are still viewed negatively (Zestcott, Bean, & Stone, 2015). There continues to be stigma towards people with tattoos. Such tattoo stigma reported includes the assumption that people with tattoos are ignorant or thuggish (Greenblatt, 2014). Of companies surveyed, concerns over tattooed employees are that customers may perceive them as dirty, abhorrent, criminal, and drug addicts (Science Daily, 2013). Other worries include the thought that the tattooed employee will appear unreliable by customers, that the company image would be compromised, or that their tattoos could possibly be viewed as offensive by co-workers and clients (Monty, 2014).

Basic human psychological processes create a tendency to judge based on appearance, and much stigma has historically been attached to tattoo recipients who tend to be seen as socially deviant (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). The appearance of tattoos is deemed as “an assault on the viewer” (Gustafson, 2000, p. 17). Schiffmacher and Reimschneider (2001) elaborate on how tattoos are perceived by others, “Tattoos evoke a

range of reactions – from interest, astonishment, admiration and reverence to consternation and abhorrence” (p. 6).

Research focused on tattoos and the characteristics associated with them include being unsuccessful in school and work, coming from broken homes, lack of ethics and morals, having poor decision-making skills, risk taking, irresponsible, drug abuse, and being rebellious, (Armstrong, 1994; Roberts & Ryan, 2002; Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004; Roleff, 2007; Porterfield, 2008). Furthermore, tattooing has been viewed by many as an impulsive or irresponsible behavior and has been associated with psychiatric disturbances in some literature (Martin & Dula, 2010).

General population studies of adolescents have found correlations between tattoos and high-risk behaviors among teenagers. Tattooed adolescents reported higher participation in substance abuse and sexual intercourse than adolescents without tattoos. Tattoos among adolescents were also associated with violent behaviors and academic problems (Roberts & Ryan, 2002).

### **Narrative Paradigm Theory**

This analysis will incorporate the Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT), developed by Walter Fisher as a framework for looking at stories. Fisher (1985) explains that;

The primary function of the paradigm is to offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world. (p. 351)

The theory contends that, with any narrative, there is more being communicated than is always recognized by the listener or viewer. Subsequently, NPT is designed to draw

attention to these overlooked messages and provides a way of thinking that take them fully into account (Fisher, 1985).

Narrative Paradigm Theory holds five assumptions: (1) all humans are storytellers, (2) a story's worth is based on good reasons, (3) good reasons are determined by one's personal background, experiences, culture, and character, (4) rationality is formulated by people's judgments of a story's reliability and truthfulness, and (5) individuals experience the world through stories and must choose among them (Fisher, 1984; West & Turner, 2000).

With these five assumptions, Narrative Paradigm Theory approaches stories as a means of influencing others. The Narrative Paradigm then; "seeks to account for *how* people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" by providing "a 'logic' for assessing stories, for determining whether or not one *should* adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or to accept as the basis for decision and action" (Fisher, 1985, p. 348).

Fisher proposes that compelling stories provide a rationale for decisions and actions (Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1989). Understanding that life is experienced through narratives, a method for judging which stories to believe and which to ignore is fundamental. Fisher provides such a method through narrative rationality. Narrative rationality operates on the two principles of coherence and fidelity (West & Turner, 2000).

The principle of coherence refers to the believability of a narrative; of whether or not the story told makes rational and coherent sense to the viewer (Fisher, 1985). When one is judging a story's logic, narrative coherence asks "whether or not a story coheres or 'hangs together,' whether or not the story is free of contradictions" (Fisher, 1985, p. 349).

Judging a story's coherence causes the viewer to ask if the story appears to provide the full picture. Coherence then is the method of sense making applied to a narrative. When utilizing coherence in judging the merit of a story the viewer must ask if the story told appears plausible to them. Fundamentally, do the characters in the story behave in consistent ways? (West & Turner, 2000).

The second principle for judging narrative rationality is fidelity, which is the reliability or the truthfulness of the story. Narrative fidelity refers to the story's ability to relate to the viewers' personal beliefs and values and is evident when a story represents accurate assertions about reality (Eaves & Savoie, 2005; Fisher, 1985). When a narrative possesses fidelity, it provides good reasons for a person to hold a belief or to take a specific action. Narrative paradigm affirms that when a story contains both coherence and fidelity, it will be believed and accepted by its listeners (West & Turner, 2000).

Narrative Paradigm Theory holds that meaning is continually created by stories. Stories are either true or untrue. The theory provides a framework to judging a story's credibility. For a story to be believable, it must meet the requirements of coherence and fidelity. Applying the strategies outlined in the theory of NPT, this study will look at the first season of *Miami Ink* for recurring themes addressed. The narratives within these instances will then be evaluated for believability using Narrative Paradigm's principles of coherence and fidelity.

### **Research Question**

The principle research question is; "Through *Miami Ink*, what themes are recurring in the first television show on tattoos, and could the narratives presenting these themes be considered rational by the principles of Narrative Paradigm Theory.

## **Methodology**

The process for collecting data for the rhetorical analysis was to look at personal narratives from all 21 episodes from *Miami Ink*'s first season available on DVD. All 21 episodes are approximately forty-two minutes long and presented without commercial interruption. *Miami Ink* is presented in the format of a reality show in which actual customers come into the tattoo shop to be tattooed and to subsequently share their story for getting a tattoo.

All 21 episodes, from season one, were carefully and repeatedly viewed. With each episode, the author noted who came into the tattoo establishment, their reasons for wanting a tattoo, and the tattoo design they chose. Questions brought to these episodes were; what narratives are told, how are they presented, and what aspects function persuasively. Episodes were then examined for recurring themes presented. Scenes containing recurring themes were then transcribed and further examined. By means of Narrative Paradigm Theory, the narratives possessing such recurring themes were then assessed for coherence and fidelity. Selected episodes were viewed to seek descriptive evidence in the narratives based on this study's theoretical perspectives.

Recurrent themes revealed within the first season of *Miami Ink*; are that tattoo stigma continues in society, the Tattoo Establishment as being a reputable business, and the bonding experience getting tattooed provides. This analysis will discuss these themes found within the client narratives. These narratives will then be evaluated for coherence and fidelity using Narrative Paradigm Theory. This paper will briefly discuss two client narratives, from two episodes, displaying these recurring themes. These two narratives

will then be assessed for coherence and fidelity using NPT. The following episodes that will be discussed are titled “*Growing Up,*” and “*The Family.*”

### **Analysis of Episodes**

Each episode of *Miami Ink* starts with the show’s introduction. The background theme music is “Funky Kingston” by the artist Toots and the Maytals. The narrator of the introduction, as well as the show itself, is the owner of the tattoo studio Ami James. The show’s introduction sets up the premise:

My name is Ami James and I’m a tattoo artist. You can see most of my work right here on South Beach. When it came down to opening my own shop, I called three of the greatest artists and four of the greatest friends a guy could ever have; Chris Nunez, Darren Brass, Chris Garver, and my loyal apprentice Yogi Harada. We poured our heart and souls into the shop. We worked our asses off. And opening our tattoo shop is going to be a big challenge for all of us. But this is our shot and we’re going to take it.

While this narration is taking place, a montage of scenes are shown. This video collage includes the artists physically building the tattoo studio, tattooing clients, displaying their own tattoos, driving in classic cars, and enjoying the glamorous South Beach nightlife. Segmented in between these images are numerous images of young, tattooed-adorned women in bikinis on the beach. The tattoo artists featured in this program are all well-groomed, dressed casually, and in their early thirties. For some episodes, the show also brings in guest artists to tattoo in the studio.

**Episode “*Growing Up*” Ashley and Mom**

The first selection observed is from the episode titled “*Growing Up*.” The client that comes in to be tattooed is Ashley, a soon to be eighteen year old that brings her Mom with her to share in the experience of her first tattoo. The scene opens with the two of them entering the tattoo studio and walking up to the front desk. The tattoo design she wishes to get is of two small birds tattooed on the left side of her lower back. Ashley and her mother come into the tattoo studio at 8pm the day before she will celebrate her eighteenth birthday. When the artists learn that she is still under legal age, they deny her request to be tattooed. The artists then invite her and her mother to return at midnight when she will be officially eighteen and a legal adult.

**Episode “*The Family*” Rick and Ryan**

The second selection observed was from the episode titled “*The Family*.” The episode features the clients of Rick and Ryan. The story of Rick and his eighteen year old son Ryan, are that they both came into the shop to each get Christian cross tattoos in different styles. The mother joins to support them both to make the experience a family affair.

**Analysis of Text**

It will be remembered that tattoo establishments have had the long-standing stigma of being unsanitary and in disreputable parts of cities. The show presents several factors to weigh against this stigma. The physical location of the tattoo studio is in the upscale, tourist neighborhood of South Beach, Florida. Depictions of sunny skies and shopping tourists provide the viewer dissonance towards this tattoo stigma. The

multitude of scenes depicting entire families in the shop, presents the tattoo shop as a family friendly location.

Inside the tattoo studio the floor plan is open with good lighting throughout. The front desk and waiting area of the shop are reminiscent of something one would see in an upscale hair salon. The tattoo studio is clean and orderly. The geography of the studio is rather modest with only four stations used for tattooing. All of these deliberate design choices play into people feeling comfortable; creating an intimate setting for clients and their families to feel at ease. Unlike traditional tattoo shops, no flash tattoo designs adorn the walls of the studio. *Miami Ink* presents their tattoo studio as a custom shop that only does original, one of a kind, tattoo designs. This concept is reinforced with the walls of the tattoo studio being decorated with colorful custom paintings of tattoo themes and the abstract.

The introduction that begins each episode may well be interpreted as an appeal to an American dream to own one's own business, "We poured our heart and souls into the shop...opening our tattoo shop is going to be a big challenge for all of us. But this is our shot and we're going to take it." Such an appeal to the entrepreneurial spirit is appealing to a large audience demographic.

### **Ashley and Mom**

The episode titled "*Growing Up*" contains the scene with Ashley and her mother. This scene addresses the long-standing stigma that tattoos are both unsanitary and unprofessional; creating obstacles to future employment opportunities. The narrative was that Ashley just turned eighteen and her decision to be tattooed is supported by her mother. If anyone would be concerned about the tattoo hindering Ashley's future



employment opportunities, it would be her mother. The mother showing her support as a parent thereby helps to provide evidence against this stereotype. This understanding is directly supported by the narration, “the negative stigma, that is associated with tattoos, is being replaced by understanding and acceptance.”

Ashley and her Mom are both casually well dressed and speak in a way reflecting a middle-class background. The tattoo design she wishes to get is of two small birds tattooed on the left side of her lower back. She explains that the image of the two birds represent her and her mother and celebrates her entrance into womanhood. The bird representing Ashley’s mother is portrayed with its wings closed. The other bird represents Ashley and has its wings open in flight symbolizing her going out on her own and looking forward to the future. The explanation of the tattoo’s meaning is then followed by an off-camera narration by Ami James, “Mom was very nervous. But the fact that she was there at all shows the negative stigma, that is associated with tattoos, is being replaced by understanding and acceptance.”

As the tattoo artist, Chris Nunez, is setting up for the tattoo the Mom asks if all of the tattooing equipment is clean and sterile. Chris Nunez responds in agreement, “Everything is brand new. Just like the Dentist. And the needles and everything are all new. A hundred percent.” The scene then shows a brief montage of the several stages of the tattoo’s progression to completion. During every tattoo, the tattoo artists are seen wearing latex gloves and practicing appropriate sanitary precautions. Ashley’s mother is subsequently shown speaking to the camera. She states very matter-of-factly, “I was against the idea of her having one [a tattoo]. But this is something she wants to do so I decided to support her.”

Audio of Chris Nunez speaking off camera is then heard, “Women take tattoos better than men. They have a higher pain threshold.” As Ashley’s tattoo is completed, both her and her mother stand in front of the mirror smiling and admiring her now completed tattoo. Ashley’s mother is then shown speaking directly to the camera: “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. It actually came out really pretty. It’s something special that we’ve done together. And she’ll always remember this and so will I.” The scene ends with both Ashley and Mom smiling and thanking everyone as they walk out of the tattoo studio.

The stigma of tattoo studios being unsanitary is based on fact, as there are indeed health concerns to take precaution with when tattooing. Hepatitis and other blood borne pathogens do pose a risk when proper health codes are not practiced. The mother’s question to the equipment’s sterilization was welcomed cordially by the artist and explained that, similar to the dentist office, all the equipment was either sterilized or brand new. By presenting this question in the scene’s narrative, an attempt is made to refute the misconception that tattoo studios are still unsanitary.

Ashley made a decision to be tattooed; creating the likelihood of being viewed by many in society as a bad decision. Her mother’s support attempts to refute this conception by showing parental approval of her choice. The mother supporting her child getting a tattoo could pose her as an unconcerned parent; allowing her daughter to subject herself to the possibility of disease or infection. Showing the mother asking questions of the sanitary measures taken goes to dispel this opinion. Her taking these precautions serves to refute the stigma that allowing her child to be tattooed makes her an unconcerned parent. The portrayal of the mother showing her support and asking

questions of the tattoo artist serve to make her appear as a caring mother showing concerned about the health and wellness of her daughter.

The mother's questions, to the tattoo artist, serve to present her as a concerned parent who also supports her daughter's choice to be tattooed. This fact provides coherence and fidelity to her actions. Society is conditioned to expect the mother to ask questions. The absence of this action would portray the mother's character as lacking; implying she was not concerned about the health of her child.

The idea of Ashley wanting to celebrate and commemorate her becoming a legal adult is not uncommon. People celebrating rites of passage in life are existent in cultures throughout the world. Ashley's desire to do so by being tattooed is presented as acceptable. The support of her mother serves to increase the credibility to her narrative.

For the artists at *Miami Ink* to deny Ashley's request to be tattooed before she was eighteen years old addresses the stigma of tattoo shops being a non-respectable industry observing unlawful practices. In addition, this narrative speaks to the stigma of underage tattooing practices. Refusing to tattoo someone because they are not of legal adult age addresses the stigma of tattoos being associated with high-risk behavior in adolescents.

Correlations have been found between tattoos and high-risk behaviors among teenagers. The strategy of addressing the stigma associated with underage tattoos does not refute stigma but seeks to clarify the stigma's parameters. Teenagers with tattoos may indeed possess high-risk behaviors, but they did not get their tattoos from a professional tattoo studio. Disassociating themselves from this demographic does not remove the social stigma associated with tattooed teenagers. However, doing so does add clarity towards distinguishing the stigma away from professional tattoo establishments.

This scene provides the understanding that adolescents with tattoos did not receive them from professional tattoo studios but through some other means. This narrative supports the idea that tattoo studios are a clean and safe place for tattooing adults.

### **Rick and Ryan**

The episode titled “*The Family*” includes the story of Rick and his son Ryan. The narrative of this father and son portrays the example of a tattoo to express one’s religious beliefs. The religious majority is still growing in acceptance of tattoos. The narrative of Rick and Ryan can be seen to counter against this stigma because their faith has at times viewed tattooing as a physical desecration of the body. Presenting themselves as a loving Christian family serves to debunk this mindset by showing it in practice. Tattoos serve to strengthen their faith and advertise their beliefs to the public.

The scene featuring father and son Rick and Ryan opens with the artist Ami James speaking to the camera about how society judges those with tattoos,

You know, people are shallow. People don’t give people a chance. You know, people just judge people for no reason. You know, it’s so stereotyped this world is. This world evolves around stereotyping. You know, that’s what happens.

Profiling – whatever you want to call it. Twelve years ago I would walk down the street and they [the police] always used to judge me and I would get pulled over right away for speeding and ‘ah he’s got a tattoo let’s call his name in – let’s check on him.’

The artist Chris Nunez is then shown explaining to the camera, “Right now we’re coming into a time where tattooing is really accepted. Within the last ten years tattooing has made a massive movement.” A voice over narration by Ami James then explains how a

perfect example of how tattoos have hit the mainstream is with their father and son clients Rick and Ryan.

Both Rick and his eighteen year old son Ryan came into the shop to each get Christian cross tattoos in different styles. The father wants his tattoo on his shoulder, while his son wants his tattoo on his back. The family of Rick, his wife, and their eighteen year-old son Ryan are all portrayed as an educated, affluent, close-knit middle-class American Christian family. Sitting next to his father, Ryan explains to the camera where he is getting his tattoo of a Christian cross,

I'm putting mine on my back just below my neck. Because that way it's not always shown but if I wanted people to see it's easy to show it to them. And I was thinking about it the other day, and that's that Jesus carried his cross on his back and I thought that was a cool symbolic thing.

The father Rick then comments that coming together as a family to be tattooed serves as a bonding experience for them. Rick is getting his cross tattoo on his outer left bicep. He then confidently affirms, "A lot of negative on tattoos. Stereotypes. And that was over the past 50 years. And it's slowly changing."

The mother of the family is then interviewed,

I came here today because yesterday my son and my husband told me they were coming together to get a tattoo. And I went what? A tattoo! . . . The symbolism [of the cross tattoo] is that we are Christians and they thought it would be a cool design to get and they probably would never get tired of it.

The camera then cuts to Ami James commenting on the family, "It's getting more open every day you know. People are more accepted to it." The mother then follows up

with humorously saying with a smile, “The family that gets *tattooed* together stays together!” The scene ends with both Rick and Ryan admiring their new tattoos and then posing with the tattoo artists for a photograph taken by the mother with her camera.

The narrative of Rick and Ryan challenges the stereotype that tattooed people come from broken homes. Through the father and son team, Rick and Ryan, this stigma is dismissed as they came as a family to support each other being tattooed. Their reasons for getting tattooed are that they are devout Christians and together believe their cross tattoos will help to reflect their faith. Reiterating that the negative stigma of tattoos is changing for the better, the narrative of Rick and Ryan reflects the growing understanding that tattoos are becoming embraced by those whose religious lifestyle has not always lent itself to tattoos. Their narrative presents the idea that tattoos can help to positively express one’s spiritual faith; serving as an outward reflection of one’s central beliefs. The narrative of Rick and Ryan shows a family in support of one another. Making tattooing a family activity supports the paradigm described of them as a loving and supportive family.

The narrative of Rick and Ryan could be viewed as an appeal to the conservative religious majority. The scene starts with presenting the idea that tattoos are starting to become acceptable in society. “Right now we’re coming into a time where tattooing is really accepted. Within the last ten years tattooing has made a massive movement.” The catalyst for this new mindset is presented with the loving Christian family of Rick, Ryan and Mom. This idea is supported by the father Rick, “A lot of negative on tattoos. Stereotypes. And that was over the past 50 years. And it’s slowly changing.” The presentation of the religious minded family supporting tattoos provides dissonance

against the socially held viewpoint of tattoos representing lack of character and morality. The mother playing off the adage of “the family that *prays* together stays together” with “the family that *gets tattooed* together stays together” goes to solidify this persuasion. The scene ending with posing for a family photo goes to support the belief of tattooing as a family friendly activity worth memorializing with pictures.

For Rick and Ryan, tattoos serve as a catalyst for sharing their faith. This lends to the understanding that tattoos serve as secondary gains for Rick and Ryan, as a chance to share their Christian faith with strangers. To accomplish their goals of sharing their religious faith with others, they wish to be approached by strangers. They want to be looked at and engaged in conversation about their Christian cross tattoos.

### **Conclusions**

Evidence collected through the application of recurring themes has uncovered that tattoo stigma continues in society, the Tattoo Establishment can be a reputable business, and that getting tattooed can be a bonding experience. Through the partisan testimonials of the artists and clients, dialog of tattoo stigma and social issues was portrayed and discussed. Themes contained in *Miami Ink* can serve to re-educate the culturally conditioned viewer’s perception about who gets tattooed and for what reasons.

By applying Narrative Paradigm Theory to *Miami Ink*, this author has come to the inference that tattoo narratives can provide essential rational against tattoo stigma. The tattoo narratives studied portray a diverse demographic expressing rational feelings and motivations for tattooing. Before a story can influence someone, it must appear free of contradictions and provide an acceptable reason for a particular behavior or action. The narratives described exhibit these aspects for the viewer.

**Study Limitations**

The limitations of this study are its sample size with only the episodes from season one were studied. The first season of *Miami Ink* contains twenty-one episodes each averaging forty-two minutes in length. Inquiry into the client narratives of the other seasons would be beneficial in determining what further tattoo themes are addressed.

**Areas of Future Research**

Only season one of *Miami Ink* was studied. The first season contains twenty-one episodes each averaging forty-two minutes in length. Inquiry into the client narratives of the other seasons would be beneficial in determining what further tattoo themes are addressed. In addition, this study did not distinguish nor address the differences in tattoo imagery among client gender and age.

This study has contributed to the body of knowledge by conducting a rhetorical analysis through Narrative Paradigm Theory. The further significance of this study is that the author's research indicates that tattoo stigma and prejudice is still present in modern society. Tattoos have persisted throughout history despite the challenges society has posed. Although tattoos have now come to a worldwide audience; negative attitudes towards those with them are still held by many. It is this author's conviction that further study and dialog holds great significance in academia and to society as a whole.



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