

TATTOO ACCEPTANCE IN ACADEMIA: PERSPECTIVES FROM ASIA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This research explores changing views on tattoos at the Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation (APU), focusing on tattoos as body art and expressions of identity. Located in Malaysia's diverse environment, APU offers a unique context for studying tattoo perceptions among students and academics. Using qualitative ethnographic methods and semi-structured interviews, insights were gathered from various participants, revealing generational and professional differences. The findings indicate a notable generational shift, with younger individuals advocating for greater acceptance of tattoos as personal and creative expressions. While older academics often view tattoos as unprofessional, there's a growing acceptance among all age groups within APU's inclusive atmosphere. The study concludes that tattoos are increasingly recognized as art and identity markers in academia, highlighting the need for policies that honour body art as part of cultural expression. This research ultimately reflects the evolving nature of academic standards and emphasizes the importance of diversity in visual identity within higher education. This study recommends the formulation of academic policies that can serve as a reference for assessing personal objectivity toward tattoos, which are understood as a form of visual expression within the academic domain.

Keywords: academic policies, body painting, personal objectivity assessment, symbolic interactionism, tattoos

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing has traditionally acted as a worldwide medium for cultural and symbolic expression, intricately woven into the practices of different ethnic and indigenous communities (Hoffman, 2015). Tattoos, when seen as contemporary art, push the limits of traditional artistic definitions (Stone, 2020), as referenced in the provided materials. Unlike visual art on canvas displayed in galleries, the descriptions highlight alternative forms of expression. In museums, tattoos are a permanent part of the body, blurring the distinction between creation and acceptance (Reiter, 2018). In Malaysia, especially in the corporate and education sectors, tattoos have often been bound up with religious taboos, conservative

cultural views, and societal biases that depict them as deviant or unprofessional (Zain, 2019). Nevertheless, global trends are slowly redefining tattoos as forms of modern visual art and personal expression (Bennett & Chan, 2021).



Figure 1. Tattoo across the timeline and cultural applications.

Source: *The fascinating history of Iban tattoos*, The Rakyat Post. (2019, December 6)

The tattooing conversation is becoming more relevant within the higher learning institutions at the Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Malaysia (APU), recognized for its commitment to diversity, creativity, and innovation (APU, 2022). This study positions APU as a central point for examining shifting perceptions of tattoo art among its academic stakeholders. As a diverse community of students and staff, APU creates a vibrant atmosphere where traditional values intersect with progressive ideas, providing a significant space for this study (Lee, 2020). The research explores how tattooing is seen not just as a fashion choice or rebellion but as a valid artistic and cultural expression, especially in the less-discussed higher learning institution environment (Smith, 2023). By analyzing the acceptance of tattoo art within APU's academic culture, this study fills a significant gap in scholarly research: understanding body art perceptions in the academic environment (Johnson, 2021). There is a lack of academic research examining tattoo perceptions in higher learning institutions contexts, particularly in Malaysia, where conservative social norms often influence public decorum and institutional professionalism (Tan, 2020). This gap is significant, primarily as universities like APU aim to encourage critical thinking, personal expression, and cross-cultural insights (Ng, 2021). This research question is whether higher learning institutions like APU will embrace tattoos as an art form. Thus, the academic setting offers a unique perspective for investigating the tension between professional standards and the acceptance of alternative aesthetic identities to determine the acceptance level within (Cheng, 2022). The significance of this study lies in its investigation of the intersection between professionalism, individual freedom, and academic inclusivity in the modern info-media era (Yong, 2020). In APU's progressive academic culture, where diverse identities and forms are celebrated, rethinking tattoos as body art initiates essential discussions about generational changes, societal diversity, and symbolic representation (Lai, 2021). This paper contends that tattoo art should be recognized as a valid creative form in academic settings, where inclusivity is a fundamental principle that acknowledges tattooing as an art form that speaks about cultural

innovation, personal identity, and the ability of institutions to adapt (Kumar, 2023). By utilizing Symbolic Interactionism, this research further unpacks how the meanings of tattoos are socially constructed, negotiated, and redefined by faculty and students within a university setting, where both tradition and change are present (Lim, 2022).

In recent years, much research has extensively explored the stigma surrounding tattoos in various professions, such as healthcare, law enforcement, and corporate sectors, where physical appearance can significantly affect career advancement. These studies underscore the complex relationship between body art and personal or societal identity, demonstrating that tattoos can symbolize rebellion, self-expression, or meaningful cultural significance. There is a notable gap in comprehending academic views on tattoo art. The human resource regulations had no clear work clauses on this matter. Often, it creates a curiosity about how the faculty members or students will react to the existence of tattoos in the classroom setup, particularly pertinent at Asia Pacific University (APU), a multicultural and innovative institution in Malaysia's diverse socio-cultural landscape. At APU, the convergence of students and educators from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds blends traditional values with modern expressions of identity, creating a distinctive academic environment. Investigating the views on tattoos within APU's academic community—including faculty, staff, and students—is crucial for grasping how these opinions influence identity formation, academic freedom, and the broader discussions on inclusivity and diversity in Malaysia's higher education landscape. The great argument is that the art form of tattooing is about preserving a tradition.



Figure 2. Contrasting generational views on tattooed appearance in academic spaces
Gen-Inked: What tattoos tell us about Millennials (June 6, 2017). Retrieved from
<https://www.sacap.edu.za/blog/applied-psychology/tattoo-meanings/>

Tattoo art, often marginalized within professional and academic settings due to enduring stigmas, is undergoing a critical reassessment as a form of legitimate artistic and personal expression. The main objective of this research is to reposition tattoo art within the academic sphere by developing a pioneering framework that challenges conventional academic norms. Rooted in sociocultural and aesthetic theories (Goffman, 1963; Doss, 2010), the study explores how tattooing can be understood not as a deviant practice but as a profound visual language communicating identity, creativity, and social meaning.



Figure 3. Visualizing the body as a medium of artistic and academic identity expression.
Source: Tattoos and identity: How body art shapes and reflects who we are. (2025). Retrieved from <https://colibritattoo.com/tattoos-and-identity/>

Conducted at Asia Pacific University (APU), a culturally diverse higher education institution in Malaysia, the research investigates the lived experiences and perceptions of academicians, students, and staff. Through qualitative methods—including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions—the study gathers rich narratives reflecting the complex interplay between institutional policies, cultural values, and personal identity (Bourdieu, 1986). Initial observations suggest tattoos increasingly express academic individuality and cultural heritage, especially within creative disciplines. For example, fine arts lecturers with traditional tattoos use them to reinforce indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. The study aspires to redefine academic freedom by addressing these dynamics, advocating for institutional policies that accept non-offensive tattoos and encourage inclusive representation. The outcomes are expected to inform curriculum design, support inclusive dress codes, and contribute to campaigns promoting academic diversity. Ultimately, this research offers a transformative perspective on tattoo art, proposing it as a meaningful and professionally relevant form of expression that enriches the cultural fabric of higher education (Maffesoli, 1996; Rooke & Clark, 2008).

This research will focus on the characteristics of Symbolic Interactionism. Using tattoos as a lens, the research will examine how this sociological theory manifests in real-world situations, particularly focusing on how academic scholars engage with and articulate the meanings of tattoo art, considering contemporary shifts. Through this examination, the research aims to uncover the nuances of tattoo art in academic society and how it reflects broader changes in social attitudes, artistic expression, and identity formation in the modern world. This study aims to explore the acceptance of tattoo art among academicians and students at the university level, focusing on Asia Pacific University. By examining their attitudes, experiences, and challenges, the research seeks to understand the implications of tattoo acceptance within professional and educational contexts. Key objectives of this research include:

1. Understanding Societal Sensitivities: How do personal and religious values influence the perception of tattoos among academicians?
2. Evaluating Professional Standards: To what extent do tattoos align with or challenge academic professional expectations?
3. Identifying Generational Shifts: How do attitudes toward tattoos differ between younger and older academics?

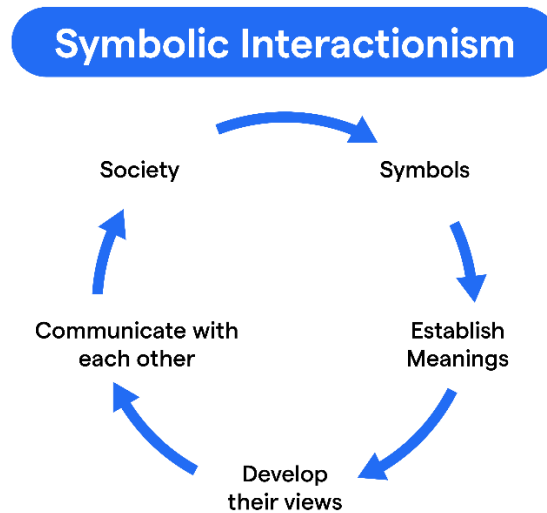


Figure 4. Symbolic Interactionism. In Symbolic Interactionism: Key Components & Significance (2024). Retrieved from <https://botpenguin.com/glossary/symbolic-interactionism>

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a gap in the literature on the intersection of personal expression and professionalism in academia. Second, it provides insights into how societal norms influence the workplace experiences of academicians, contributing to discussions on inclusivity and diversity. Finally, the findings may inform policies and practices that support a more accepting and equitable academic environment.

METHOD

Employing a qualitative methodology, the study conducts semi-structured interviews with 10 participants (five lecturers and five students) from Asia Pacific University. The thematic analysis investigates societal sensitivities and professional norms across generations and genders. This research will leverage interviews, immersing the researcher in settings where tattoo culture flourishes in higher education. The main goal of this qualitative technique is to meticulously document and analyze the interactions among academics, such as department leaders and lecturers, along with their social circles—the study endeavors to comprehend how tattoos are socially constructed and perceived within these diverse contexts.

The research will feature comprehensive semi-structured interviews with academics and students. These discussions will aim to draw out participants' perspectives and interpretations regarding the meanings and personal views of tattoos in their personal and professional lives. Through these dialogues, the study seeks to uncover how tattoos are viewed

within different academic and social contexts. Throughout the observation and interviewing process, detailed field notes will be maintained to capture a wealth of observations, documenting vital elements like non-verbal communication, body language, and the overall environmental context, which are essential for grasping the social dynamics of tattoo culture. The research will include 10 interview participants, evenly split between 5 lecturers and five students. This balanced composition will facilitate a comparative examination of viewpoints from both educators and students on tattoos, resulting in a more profound comprehension of the subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meaning, Identity, and Aesthetics: Findings from Academicians on the Perception of Tattoos in Higher Education

The acceptance of tattooing varies significantly among the primary ethnic groups in APU, namely the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other international communities. This variation is deeply influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and social factors unique to each group, resulting in a fascinating tapestry of beliefs and practices surrounding body art. Each community's perspective on tattoos is profoundly shaped by its historical background. It reflects myriad experiences and influences, distinct religious beliefs guiding moral and ethical understandings of body modifications, and the evolution of societal trends often challenging traditional views. Recently, there has been a notable shift in attitudes toward tattoos, particularly as younger generations increasingly view them as a legitimate means of self-expression, an innovative form of art, and a representation of cultural identity that transcends mere aesthetic considerations. This generational transition is significant, illustrating the changing mindset of Generation Z, who are more open to exploring and embracing various forms of individual expression rather than merely seeing them as a taboo subject to avoid.

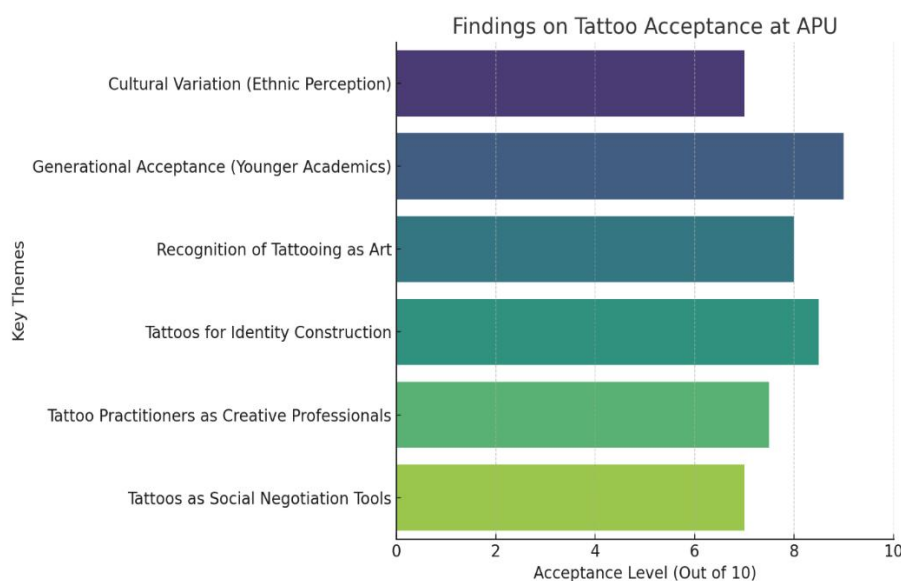


Figure 5. Perceptions of tattoos vary among Malaysia's major ethnic groups at APU.

Although acceptance of tattoos remains somewhat limited and tends to vary widely based on factors of parental control, organizational rules, and, at a certain point, it was financial constraints due to the fact tattooing is an expensive process, an increasing number of members of APU are choosing to get tattoos as a form of personal expression of their individuality and uniqueness. The research showed a positive acceptance of tattoos as an art form. Respondents have shown a significant level of acceptance of this art form. There was no sign of surprise or shock if anyone were to be spotted with tattoos. The research results reflect the rise of tattoo awareness over social media content, offering ideas and influencing designs and unique styles tailored to suit various personal tastes and preferences. This awareness provides a space for artistic expression and cultivates a community where individuals can share their stories and connect with others who appreciate the artistry and meaning behind tattooing. Consequently, more academicians and students now view tattoos through a different lens, beyond mere body art, towards a more profound understanding of personal significance. As such, tattoos are gradually being embraced as aesthetic adornments and as meaningful symbols that reflect individual stories and identities, weaving an intricate narrative into the diverse tapestry of a higher learning society, showcasing its unique cultural heritage preservation and evolving artistic expressions.

Among the key findings of the research is that recognizing cultural differences among ethnic groups is crucial in influencing societal views on body art, especially tattoos. In diverse environments like Malaysia, where ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities coexist, attitudes toward tattoos are intertwined with cultural, religious, and historical contexts. For example, in particular indigenous societies, tattoos hold sacred significance as symbols of identity and heritage, whereas in more conservative areas, particularly those adhering to Islamic teachings, tattoos may be perceived as taboo or socially unacceptable (Othman et al., 2020). Thanks to social media, information is widely spread and learned. Grasping and respecting these cultural differences is vital for cultivating an inclusive atmosphere, especially in academic institutions that value diversity. By honoring and recognizing cultural variations, universities help create a more accepting academic environment that accommodates a broader range of identity expressions, including body art. This acceptance not only diminishes cultural biases but also fosters conversations about artistic validity and personal expression, promoting a comprehensive understanding of tattoos as meaningful cultural and artistic representations rather than as inappropriate or unprofessional markers.

A significant trend in the changing views on tattoo art within academia is a generational shift toward positive acceptance, especially among younger scholars. Unlike earlier generations, which often linked tattoos to deviance or subcultural membership, the research has shown that younger academic professionals increasingly see body art as a valid form of self-expression, creativity, and identity formation (Kosut, 2006). This group, influenced by more liberal global trends and digital connectivity, views tattoos not as hindrances to professionalism but as personal narrative and authenticity extensions. In diverse academic settings like Asia Pacific University (APU), where innovation and diversity are paramount, younger faculty and researchers are more inclined to question traditional norms regarding appearance and advocate for inclusive attitudes toward body modifications. Their acceptance mirrors a broader cultural shift in higher education, where individual expression is increasingly recognized as essential to academic freedom and identity politics. This generational openness from the research findings hopes to foster institutional change,

promoting policies and pedagogies that embrace and validate modern artistic and personal expressions, including tattooing.



Figure 6. Evolving acceptance: Tattoos in higher education.
The growing acceptance of tattoos in the workplace. (2019, January 28). Retrieved from <https://alternativelyspeaking.ca/the-growing-acceptance-of-tattoos-in-the-workplace/>

The research findings acknowledge that tattooing is a valid art form gaining momentum in global and academic discussions, challenging stigmas that have marginalized body art. Previously viewed as mere subcultural dissent or deviant behaviour, tattooing is now recognized for its intricate design processes, cultural meanings, and aesthetic appeal (DeMello, 2000). This new perspective aligns with contemporary interpretations of art that embrace a variety of expressive mediums beyond traditional canvas art, recognizing the body as a canvas for artistic expression. In academic contexts, particularly in arts and design departments, tattooing is critically analyzed for its technical mastery, narrative richness, and symbolic significance. Both scholars and practitioners assert that tattooing encompasses essential elements of visual art, such as composition, symbolism, and audience engagement, thus deserving inclusion in art education and critique (Atkinson, 2003). The increasing presence of tattoo studies in university programs and exhibitions highlights a changing paradigm that affirms tattooing as an art form and integrates it into larger discussions about identity, culture, and visual literacy. This evolution is particularly significant in culturally rich academic institutions like Asia Pacific University, where interdisciplinary approaches encourage fresh perspectives on contemporary artistic practices.

This research shows that tattooing's identity development process aligns with symbolic interactionism, highlighting how social interactions shape and negotiate meanings (Blumer, 1969). Through the interviews, respondents agreed that tattoos represent significant life events, cultural heritage, religious beliefs, or ideological values, turning the body into a canvas of personal experiences (Atkinson, 2003). Within academic settings, particularly among younger and progressive scholars, tattooing is increasingly seen as a legitimate mode of self-

expression. In multicultural institutions like Asia Pacific University (APU), tattoos often reflect hybrid identities and global cultural influences. Thus, the art of tattooing goes beyond mere aesthetics and delves into a symbol of identity, enabling individuals to assert control over how they are perceived in both academic and social contexts. This underscores the growing recognition of tattooing as a creative, expressive, and identity-affirming art form in contemporary society and is slowly but surely being accepted in higher learning institutions.

Tattoos serve as symbolic instruments through which individuals navigate their societal roles, particularly at the intersection of identity, conformity, and self-expression. Grounded in Symbolic Interactionism, the tattooing process transcends mere aesthetics; it is a dialogic interaction where meanings are created, challenged, and reshaped through social engagement (Blumer, 1969). Tattoos can represent connections to specific subcultures, professions, belief systems, or life phases as social identity and group affiliation indicators. For instance, a visible tattoo might contest prevailing norms in conservative settings while simultaneously proclaiming individuality, resistance, or authenticity. In academic and professional environments, people may use tattoos to reconcile their identity with institutional expectations, skillfully negotiating their role within established hierarchies while showcasing their uniqueness. This negotiation is particularly evident in culturally diverse institutions like Asia Pacific University (APU), where tattoos emerge as sites for creating meaning across ethnic, generational, and ideological divides. Consequently, tattoos mirror one's societal role and actively shape others' interpretations of that role, rendering them dynamic tools in the ongoing development of self within the social fabric. Finally, based on the respondents' interviews, the research findings support that tattoos are dynamic social symbols. Symbolic Interactionism tattoo meanings are not static; they change and develop over time, reflecting cultural shifts. Personal experiences and societal trends play significant roles in shaping identity. Tattoos are powerful tools that enable individuals to express their identities, allowing wearers to communicate personal stories, beliefs, and affiliations. Consequently, tattoos serve as a medium through which people articulate their identities, balancing personal significance with public perception. As societal norms evolve, so do the interpretations and significance of tattoos, emphasizing their dynamic role in identity formation. Tattoo meanings are not static; they change and develop over time, reflecting cultural shifts, personal experiences, and societal trends. As tattoos gain recognition as art, universities must reconcile their image with inclusivity.

Policy Recommendation: Embracing Societal Sensitivities in Academic Spaces (Tattoos)

To address societal concerns about tattoos within academic settings, especially in culturally diverse places like Malaysia, universities should adopt progressive and inclusive policies. Academic institutions need to create an appearance policy that fosters acceptance and does not discriminate against individuals with non-offensive tattoos. This approach recognizes tattoos as valid forms of personal expression and cultural identity, allowing students and faculty to express their authentic selves without fear of stigma or repercussions. Alongside this, campuses should implement educational programs focused on cultural sensitivity. These initiatives would enhance awareness and understanding of the diverse religious, cultural, and generational attitudes toward tattoos. Since tattoos can signify

meanings from sacred symbols to artistic expression, more education is vital for staff and students to grasp these distinctions, particularly in a diverse academic landscape.

Furthermore, universities should develop clear policies that protect the right to self-expression, including the presence of tattoos, provided they are not offensive or inappropriate in professional contexts. These protections are essential to prevent discrimination and ensure that tattooed individuals are not unfairly judged or excluded from academic or professional opportunities. Recognizing tattoos as part of one's identity supports the institution's commitment to inclusivity. A review of codes of professional conduct is crucial. Conventional standards of professionalism frequently neglect the changing dynamics of personal expression. Updating these codes guarantees that outdated biases, like the association of tattoos with deviance, are substituted with modern, equitable standards that celebrate diversity in appearance. In addition, academic institutions should actively promote scholarly and creative engagement with tattoo art. By supporting research, exhibitions, panel discussions, and coursework related to body art, universities validate tattoos as subjects worthy of intellectual inquiry. This encourages open dialogue and integrates contemporary art forms into academic discourse. Equally important is affirming the university's role as a safe space where all forms of identity and expression are protected. Creating an atmosphere encouraging individuality helps students and faculty feel valued and supported. Policies should be communicated and reflect the university's values of respect, diversity, and academic freedom. Lastly, policy development should be inclusive and consultative, involving administrative decision-makers, faculty members, students, and external community representatives. This ensures that policies are well-informed, socially sensitive, and broadly supported.

In conclusion, as tattoos gain wider acceptance globally and locally, universities must lead by example in creating inclusive environments that respect and validate body art as a legitimate cultural and artistic expression. Through thoughtful policy implementation, higher education institutions can foster respect for diversity while aligning with evolving social norms.

Evaluating Professional Standards: Academic Policy Stance on Professionalism

In the changing landscape of higher education, academic policies on professionalism need to adjust to modern social and cultural dynamics, including identity expressions such as tattoos. Professionalism should not be limited to a conservative appearance but assessed based on integrity, competence, and significant contributions to academic life. Academic institutions are urged to embrace an inclusive definition of professionalism, where faculty and students are evaluated on work ethic, qualifications, teaching effectiveness, and scholarly involvement rather than physical appearance. In this light, visible tattoos, provided they are not offensive or disruptive, should not influence perceptions of professionalism. Institutions can create adaptable and contemporary professional guidelines that reflect shifting social values while upholding institutional integrity. These policies must clearly state that non-offensive tattoos do not breach professional standards and should not serve as grounds for discrimination or exclusion within academic settings.

Furthermore, a fair and equitable policy on body expression aligns with the larger institutional aim of fostering diversity and inclusion. In a multicultural society like Malaysia, universities should avoid perpetuating outdated or culturally biased norms that might marginalize students or staff. Instead, institutions ought to exemplify the acceptance of diverse

identities and expressions within the context of academic excellence. By incorporating principles of equity and respect for cultural expression into professional standards, universities can show their dedication to a progressive, inclusive, and socially responsive academic environment. Such policies uphold academic freedom and enhance the university's role as a place where professionalism is measured not by appearance but by ethical, intellectual, and pedagogical excellence.

Identifying Generational Shifts: A Detailed Description

Generational shifts refer to the changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors between older and younger cohorts within academic institutions, particularly in how they perceive tattoos and other forms of personal expression. In the context of higher education, these shifts are apparent as universities become increasingly diverse and influenced by global cultural trends.

Younger academicians and students, particularly those from Generation Z and younger millennials, tend to view tattoos as a legitimate form of personal identity, creativity, and cultural expression. For them, tattoos are not markers of rebellion or deviance but symbolic representations of life experiences, beliefs, or artistic values. This generation is more exposed to liberal ideologies, global media, and inclusive narratives, which foster greater acceptance of alternative appearances and lifestyle choices. As a result, many younger individuals see no conflict between having tattoos and maintaining professional or academic integrity. In contrast, older generations of academicians, particularly those raised in more conservative environments, may still associate tattoos with negative stereotypes such as deviance, unprofessionalism, or subcultural affiliations. Their perceptions are often shaped by traditional values, religious teachings, or institutional norms emphasizing conformity and visual neutrality. While some older cohorts are becoming more open-minded, a notable divide in acceptance levels remains based on generational perspectives. This shift is about personal preference and reflects a broader transformation in societal values, identity politics, and academic inclusivity. As the younger generation gradually takes on more leadership roles in academia, their progressive views will likely influence institutional policies and reshape what is considered acceptable or professional within academic settings. Recognizing and understanding these generational differences is essential for creating a harmonious, forward-thinking university culture. It encourages mutual respect, intergenerational dialogue, and policy frameworks that accommodate diverse perspectives while upholding academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of higher education adopting inclusive policies that acknowledge tattoos as a valid means of self-expression. As younger generations increasingly pursue authenticity in their identities, accepting tattoos in academic settings signifies a considerable change in societal perspectives on individuality. By welcoming this form of body art, universities validate their students' personal choices and contribute to fostering a more accepting and diverse educational environment. This development reflects changing attitudes towards identity, where creative expressions such as tattoos are considered legitimate and significant elements of one's narrative. Thus, this creates the potential for developing inclusive aesthetics about tattoo acceptance within the Malaysian academic sphere.

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