Art Within Art: Exploring the Meaning of Body Art in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

Braydon Russell Johnson\textsuperscript{1} and Dr. Kim Dorsch\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}Department of Psychology, University of Regina

\textsuperscript{2}Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina
Abstract

When watching combat athletes step into the arena, a spectator is likely to notice that many fighters are adorned with body art. In recent years, tattoos in sports have been investigated to determine if they provide a direct advantage in athletic performance, but otherwise, this particular intersection has been sparsely researched. This study engages with Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) athletes to explore the relationship between fighters and their tattoos. The participation criteria required athletes to be 18 years or older, have achieved at least a purple belt in the sport, and have a tattoo. The participants consisted of 5 men between the ages of 25 to 37 years of age. Four participants were black belts (approx. ten years of experience), and the other participant was a purple belt (approx. four years of experience). The study used in-depth interviews guided by phenomenological principles. The analysis also included a combination of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze the contents of the interviews, a personal journal for the bracketing process, and photos of participant tattoos. Results indicate that these BJJ athletes share meaning in the following three ways: First, for active competitors, specific tattoos symbolize personifications of internal feelings and abilities that are seemingly helpful to athlete performance; and they are meant to purposefully convey an augmented sense of toughness to appear more imposing. Second, most athletes reported that the most common tattoos in BJJ commemorate the sport's influence on the athlete's sense of self. Third, the relationships that competitive athletes' have with their tattoos reveal that non-BJJ-related tattoos took on additional meaning relating to their practice of BJJ.
Introduction

Research regarding the meaning of tattoos and athletes is sparse and remains under-researched to the author’s current understanding. The lack of research has significantly influenced how the investigation has been conducted. Without information to support or lead the investigation forward, the perspective of the research must be exploratory in nature. Subsequently, the background information for the study will derive information from a multitude of areas. It will include tattoo literature related to human history, anthropology, and psychology. To best flesh out the area of research, the author has identified combat athletes and their tattoos as a phenomenon to be described in in-depth interviews. To make sense of the descriptions of the phenomenon in question, the researcher will analyze the interview data through a process called interpretive phenomenological analysis. This study aims to enrich the literature regarding the relationship between tattoos and combat athletes in hopes of opening up the opportunity for other researchers interested in investigating athletes and their tattoos.

Research Questions

This paper will consider two perspectives within tattoo literature. Firstly, the historical and evolutionary utility of tattoos through body ornamentation to better understand the role of tattoos in fighting culture, and secondly, how tattoos relate to our self-perceptions. Each perspective will be used to inform four essential research questions for the exploration of this area:

1. Is there a specific relationship between Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes and the meaning of their tattoos?
2. Do Tattoos affect athlete performance in any way?
3. Does the Sport influence the athlete’s decision to get a tattoo?
4. Does the sport Influence the contents of the tattoo?

Background

*History: Utility of Tattoos Across Cultures and Time*

**Across Cultures**

Human beings have been tattooing their bodies for at least 8,000 years (Samadelli et al., 2015). Throughout that time, many cultures have used them in various ways. The oldest body discovered with tattoos is believed to have had a deformed spine, and the tattoos acted as markers to indicate where the healers needed to perform acupuncture to treat his pain (Samadelli et al., 2015). In Egypt, specific women were tattooed with culturally significant animals and geometric patterns to amplify their sexuality and fertility (Deter-wolf & Krutak, 2020). Other cultures such as the Shan Buddhists have used tattoos to protect the wearer from physical or spiritual harm, and the Iroquois used tattoos to boast about surviving long journeys and heroic acts in battle (Deter-Wolf & Diaz-Granados, 2013; Tannenbaum, 1987). Despite the varying utility among tattoos across cultures, the literature suggests some themes emerge from the past and present that are more common motivations for wearing tattoos than others.

**Across Time**

In her study on *The Evolutionary Motivations Behind Tattoos and Body Piercings in Popular Culture*, Carmen et al. (2012) outline three distinct categories that are the most reoccurring motivations across cultures historically and contemporarily:

- a symbol representing an important event, love, or friendship from the past,
• a representation of group membership, and/or
• a marker of individuality (Carmen et al., 2012).

These three themes are seemingly all elements that work to consolidate internal phenomena.

Tattoos as functions of internal clarity are especially evident in the Maori people whose ritual tattooing was called “ta moko” (The Coconet TV, 2020). In reference to the first theme, for the Maori people of the Polynesian islands, tattooing served as a ritual to mark the psychological and sociological onset and events of adulthood (The Coconet TV, 2020). Tattooing adulthood serves as a symbol of growth by adorning an increasingly larger mosaic, which would have required the recipient to endure a great deal of pain over a series of sessions throughout their life (The Coconet TV, 2020). By gradually marking the wearer, the extent to which the individual is tattooed is a physical representation of how old the wearer is and the event of adulthood they currently occupy. Secondly, the content and style of the tattoos will indicate the group membership of the wearer because the artist would have been a product of the culture and been required to respect the specific customs of the community that they would be tattooing (The Coconet TV, 2020). Thirdly, their tattoos are also an aesthetic expression of the recipient’s identity. They are expressions of personal symbols and indications of higher social authority and are unique to the individual (The Coconet TV, 2020). It is likely that tattooing worked as a ritualistic tool to represent the inner experiences that have left an impression on the subject’s inner development; and was likely done by permanently marking the body with symbols that represented past experiences, people who have influenced them, personal symbolism, or connections to their communities. Despite the varying utility that tattoos have served across cultures and their proposed interaction with the wearers, Carmen and her colleagues outline an
Evolutionary argument to offer a deeper insight into the motivations that have affected our decision to get a tattoo historically and contemporarily.

**Evolutionary Motivations**

**Body Ornamentation and “Upping the Ante”**

Carmen et al.’s (2012) evolutionary argument begins with a proposition of two major hypotheses. The first is a link between ornamenting our bodies and the human tendency to externalize our thoughts symbolically in several ways. They argue that around 40,000 years ago, humans began showing evidence of externalizing their thinking symbolically in the form of cave art, jewelry, and other mediums; and that it was only a matter of time until the canvas for our self-expression became the human body itself. The authors term the second hypothesis “upping the ante.” It is defined as the gradual increase in the widespread use of tattoos due to increased population density and innovations in health care. They argue that this relationship has forced people to make more of an impression of fitness due to the population increase. They argue that medical practices have allowed more people to get tattoos to “up the ante.” In other words, using body ornamentation to improve their chances of attracting a mate.

**Extended Phenotype**

Carmen and her colleagues believe that adorning the body with tattoos is a parallel expression of a natural phenomenon found in nature called phenotype extension. In the case of peacocks, expressing the phenotype is the elaborate display of feathers to attract a mate. Although this is an example of biological ornamentation, Carmen and her colleagues suggest that humans go beyond the biological and create an extension of their phenotype by adorning the body with tattoos (Carmen et al., 2012). Although a modern person’s decision to get a tattoo also
often includes how it will look aesthetically, this does not mean that aesthetic body
ornamentation serves an exclusive function with respect to reproduction. Adorning the body also
seemingly shares an interesting relationship with defending self-interests. To attract a potential
mate also means competing with other suitors who strive for the same outcomes. This
competition may require more vibrant ornamentation to ensure their desired mate chooses them,
or it may also serve as an intimidation factor for competing suitors. In fighting culture,
competition with another dominant opponent often begins before the actual fight itself. It begins
as a psychological game that can often involve intimidation. In addition to the purpose of
attracting a mate, nature offers many examples of how the extension of phenotypes is utilized to
help prey animals influence their predators psychologically before a physical confrontation. In
the case of the peacock butterfly, it has evolved to flash the obscure colour patterns on its wings
to overt a surely fatal confrontation with birds who are superior in physical confrontations
through intimidation (Vallin et al., 2005). The aforementioned evolutionary dynamic of tattoos
as a display of intimidation, combined with historical motivations to consolidate inner
experiences symbolically, may provide an interesting insight into the psychological interaction
between tattoos and combat athletes.

**Tattoos and Self-concept**

**Individual Sports, Tattoos, and Self-Esteem**

In addition to its functionality as an extended phenotype to reproduce or intimidate one’s
opponent, ornamenting uniqueness can also serve to reassure or empower the athlete (Laborde et
al., 2016; Swami, 2011). At the very least, adorning the body with tattoos may help provide the
self-esteem that is required to compete (Swami, 2011). It is here where there is an intersection
between sports practiced individually, which demand a heightened positive self-perception, and
the potential psychological changes that result due to adorning the body with tattoos. (Laborde et al., 2016; Swami, 2011). Martial Arts are especially a psychological game of self-esteem and confidence due to each discipline’s dependence on the athlete’s individual performance rather than being a part of a team. Performing as an individual athlete demands the development of a more positive self-perceived practice and attitude within the sport (Laborde et al., 2016). According to Laborde et al. (2016), those attitudes consist of self-efficacy, positivity, self-esteem, and perseverance. The literature around tattoo adornment suggests that getting tattoos improves the wearer’s self-perceptions. Swami’s (2011) study indicates that the dissatisfaction and anxiety that both men and women reported about their bodies decreased significantly.

Additionally, Swami also found that men and women reported significant increases in “distinctive appearance” and “self-ascribed uniqueness.” Swami suggests these findings indicate that self-expression, identity, and uniqueness are not just predictors of who decides to get a tattoo but are also outcomes for the people who get them. Moreover, by getting a tattoo and increasing one’s uniqueness, the wearer will also increase their positive regard (Swami, 2011). As mentioned earlier, positive regard is more prevalent in individual sport athletes (Laborde et al., 2016). If tattoos serve as reinforcements to self-esteem, they may also serve a type of utility to tattooed athletes that are not entirely obvious.

**Tattoos and Psychological Healing**

Clinical literature may offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between tattoos and how we perceive ourselves. In Fredrick and Bradley’s (2000) study, it was found that individuals aged 16-30 received tattoos for intrinsic reasons. For those intrinsic reasons, tattoos have been found to be useful therapeutically in the face of depression, anxiety, abuse and loss. Alter-Muri (2020) suggests that there is an interesting relationship in the literature. College students with tattoos
were found to have a higher mean of depression and anxiety than those without tattoos. However, in a separate study, participants with tattoos had lower scores of depression than people without tattoos. She explains that some women would place tattoos where they were injured after being in a violent relationship. People who had experienced loss used tattoos to remember and communicate the significance of that loss to others, and the semicolon had become a symbol that people with depression would get tattooed to “represent a sentence that did not end.” Other investigators suggest that tattoos are a form of visual autobiography (Alter-Muri, 2020).

Many symbols are used to represent our thoughts and our experiences. The tattoo to self-relationship offers an opportunity to examine the self-conceptualization of the wearer through their tattoos. Examining the self within tattoos allows clinicians to use body art as a means of helping in the therapeutic process, especially with military veterans who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and have a difficult time opening up (Dyvik & Welland, 2018). The relationship between tattoos and our self-perceptions may reach such a significant depth in combat sport athletes, that aspects of the self and the sport are likely expressed in their tattoos.

**Athlete Performance and Tattoos**

To investigate such a relationship, Kluger and Samimi (2019) studied soccer players in The World Cup in Russia to examine whether or not tattooed players had any direct and particular advantage as a result of having a tattoo. The participants were categorized into groups of players with and without tattoos. Game statistics from The World Cup were compared between groups to judge their performance differences. Essentially, the authors did not find a direct and obvious advantage as a result of having tattoos in regards to player performance in
The World Cup. Although there was no obvious effect due to having tattoos on athletes' World Cup performances, it may be important to inquire beyond their direct utility.

**Methodology**

Surprisingly, research regarding the relationship between tattoos and athletes is scarce. Due to the lack of research in the area, the primary intention of the research has been exploratory in nature. As such, we have employed a phenomenological approach in the hopes of using in-depth qualitative interviews to help develop the initial understanding of the phenomenon by describing and interpreting the athlete’s tattoos as they relate to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Phenomenological qualitative research aims to deal deeply with complex human experiences and meanings (Davidsen, 2013). By describing the characteristics that make up the phenomenon, it aims to capture, as close as is humanly possible, how the phenomenon is experienced within the context that it is experienced (Davidsen, 2013). Each method within phenomenology aims to study the phenomenon through rich descriptions or narratives that can shed light on their experience with it (Davidsen, 2013). Their testimonies are likely to develop a first in-depth description of meaning and tattoos within the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu setting.

**Bracketing**

Phenomenology commonly deploys the usage of a bracketing process to account for researcher bias that can have a negative impact on the description and interpretation of the phenomenon (O’Halloran et al., 2018). Bracketing is a process of separating one’s natural attitudes, prior knowledge, assumption, and interpretations so that the investigator can remain entirely focused on the phenomenon as it is brought to their attention (O’Halloran et al., 2018). Otherwise, without creating the separation of one’s biases from the description process, it will be
increasingly more challenging to capture the phenomenon as it is experienced by the interviewee (O’Halloran et al., 2018). However, a critical difference between phenomenology and other qualitative methods is the role of the interviewer. Typically, the researcher assumes an objective position and is seen only as an instrument for collecting data. In phenomenology, the interviewer’s biases are not only made aware to protect from data contamination or loss of objectivity but they are also made aware to inform and interpret the data (O’Halloran et al., 2018). Phenomenologists suggest that the interviewee should be seen as the expert on the phenomenon, and it is not until after participants describe the phenomenon that an interpretive phenomenological analysis is conducted (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The primary investigator will practice bracketing by journaling to make himself aware of his own biases before and throughout the study. This will be imperative due to the researcher’s involvement with the sport and his possession of tattoos. Participants will also be asked to provide a picture of their tattoos, which will use the contents of the tattoos to help inform the final analysis of the study.

**Participants**

5 participants were recruited with a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu experience level of a purple belt (4-5 years of training or more) to a black belt (8-10 years of training or more). Participants were also required to be at least 18 years of age, possess at least one tattoo, preferences were made if the tattoos pertained to martial artists, and effective communication was a necessity. The rationality for the sample size is to have a sample large enough to capture essential data and a small enough sample size that keeps the data from becoming redundant or losing its meaning (O’Halloran et al., 2018). Participants are required to have the amount of experience mentioned above because it is assumed that if there are participants who are most likely to have a tattoo related to their
martial art, they will be more seasoned combat athletes. The sample consisted of 1 male purple belt and 4 male black belts. Ages ranged from 26 to 37 years old.

**Measures**

This study utilized a triangulation method by employing three measurements to gather data. First, we conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews as the primary source of data collection. The semi-structured interviews use the structure of the questions to keep the phenomenon at the center of the discussions, and the open component will allow for more organic conversation and elaboration (Wimpenny & Grass, 2000). The goal of the interviewing process was to continuously facilitate an elaboration of the phenomenon and to build a description of it as it is experienced by the participant (Wimpenny & Grass, 2000). Secondly, the primary investigator kept a journal to facilitate two purposes. The first purpose was for the bracketing process. It has allowed the researcher to suspend his assumption about the phenomenon by becoming more aware of them, not interrupting the interview process and focusing on establishing a description of the phenomenon (Wimpenny & Grass, 2000). The second purpose will serve as a log for the primary investigator's intuitions while interacting with the literature, data collection, and his experiences relating to being a tattooed BJJ athlete. Thirdly, researchers will be asking participants for a picture of their tattoos, which will allow us to draw significance from their symbolism.

**Procedure**

We recruited 5 Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes by purposeful snowball sampling through a network of BJJ gyms in Saskatchewan. The first five participants were then identified, and the interviews were conducted over Zoom. Each interview took no longer than 60 minutes in length,
and the participants were asked a series of open-ended questions over Zoom that facilitated a discussion regarding their tattoos and their practice of BJJ. Prior to the interview, participants consented to have pictures taken of their tattoos, and after the interviews, the participants sent the investigator their pictures. The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed using a transcribing technology called Otter.ai, where they were then analyzed in relation to the journal and pictures of participants’ tattoos.

Analysis

The data was analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). The interpretive phenomenological approach is meant to interpret the participant’s “lifeworld,” or rather, to interpret the description of their lived experience relating to the phenomenon (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Essentially, during the interview, participants make sense of their experience with tattoos as they relate to BJJ. Afterwards, the researcher analyzed how participants made sense of their relationship with tattoos and BJJ by interpreting their explanations (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The interpretation is a process derived from hermeneutics, which is a process that involves making meaning intelligible through text as it is understood by the researcher (Eatough & Smith, 2017). It has since changed to be a twofold interpretive perspective, including both what can be interpreted grammatically and psychologically (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In IPA, the analytical process is conducted by layering a series of interpretations (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The interpretations were layered by analyzing each individual measure. Firstly, the researcher interpreted his initial interaction using the transcript from the interviews. Secondly, the researcher then interpreted the information contained in the journal, which houses both the researcher’s assumptions regarding the study and his thoughts throughout the entirety of the study. Thirdly, the researcher interpreted the pictures of participants’ tattoos. Following the first
round of layering, the researcher used his interpretations from each measure to triangulate a final interpretation by the way each measure relates to one another and as a whole. The motivation to conduct a triangulation method will help protect the researcher from linearly analyzing the data and amplify the analysis's meaning (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

**Findings**

**The Fighter-Tattoo Mentality**

In this section, I have summarized three ways that competitors expressed how their tattoos directly impact their training and competition in BJJ. Although each active competitor in the study (3) had distinct ways their tattoos related to their training, all three were functions of improving their practice and deriving strength from the images that resonate with them most.

Each fighter expressed that they were not intentionally aware of how other competitors perceived their tattoos. Instead, most conveyed that when they chose their tattoos, they chose symbols or themes that they believed “looked cool” or were “badass.” I asked fighters to elaborate on their definition of each of these terms, and they suggested that their tattoos were intentionally chosen to portray a type of toughness or to appear physically imposing. Their descriptions of tough-looking tattoos often included similar symbols such as skulls, weapons, and other related symbols. Having tattoos in and of themselves was also considered a way of communicating toughness, and many participants referenced the amount of pain one must endure to get tattoos as a reason for that. Despite each fighter’s description of typical tattoos that conveyed toughness, fighters indicated that they wanted to convey this toughness in unique ways rather than having typical expressions of toughness. Fighters wanted to express their toughness uniquely because they also wanted their body to represent who they were or how their fighting
style was unique. This uniqueness was often portrayed through combinations of symbols, including animals, mythology, religion, cultural heritage, and personal artifacts.

However, tattoos were not used entirely for feeling unique or tough. Fighters who were competing regularly described how their tattoos also functioned as sources of strength in various ways. For example, one of the fighters outlined a hypothetical situation that detailed how he chooses his tattoos and the way that his tattoos relate to his practice. He said hypothetically, if he wanted to get a tattoo of a devil, he would get it because he wants to make the image a part of him and then portray the feelings from the image on the mat where BJJ is performed. He is aware that when he is fighting, there are specific scenarios in a fight where the characteristics represented by these images become helpful to him. He equates a devil to being mean, ruthless, or conveying a general fear of seeing the devil. If he were in a position where he could be ruthless or make someone feel the fear that is felt when seeing the devil, he would channel the characteristics within the image and induce a feeling in himself that can provide the appropriate technique for that specific situation in the fight.

Another way fighters describe drawing strength from their tattoos is where they decided to place their tattoos. Some fighters would place tattoos on particular areas of their body, which are significant to their fighting style or commonly used techniques, to convey a remarkable quality about them and the way they used that body part. An example of this was the association of medusa’s head and her ability to turn her foes to stone with the participant’s elbow and its capacity for knockouts.

Other times tattoos have served as reminders. Another participant explained how seeing his tattoos before a fight would remind him of his family history and culture. His family name
reminds him of his past, and his ancestors remind him of the long line of warriors he descends from. These reminders help him remember just how prepared he is to fight whenever required.

**The Fighter-Tattoo Mentality: Analysis and Interpretation**

The association of toughness with tattoos can be traced back to how tattooing originated in the west. Tattoos were first brought to the west by Captain James Cook and his sailors who were tattooed by Polynesian artists when they returned to Europe. Since then, tattoos have been commonly associated with uncivilized societies and masculine outsider groups, and as a result, a negative cultural attitude formed toward people who had tattoos (Burgess & Clark, 2010). However, the athletes indicated that tattoos have become more accepted, not only in the grappling world but in the general culture as well. Although western attitudes toward tattoos have changed over time, the association of tattoos and toughness is likely a remnant of traditional western opinions toward tattoos that have since been accepted but still remain in some aesthetic sense.

However, there may be somewhat of a difference between externalizing one’s phenotype to appear tough and externalizing one's phenotype to feel tough. Fighters expressed that they paid little attention to how they were perceived by other fighters, but also expressed they wanted to portray a general sense of toughness. Although tattoos are very physical, they are personifications of very psychological forces, and the focus of their use should maybe be where they originate, rather than where they end up. Competitors explained that for BJJ-related tattoos, they only received tattoos if they came across an image that resonated with something inside of them, and represented a feeling that they felt was useful to portray on the mat. If these feelings are useful to the athlete and they decide to get them tattooed on their body, they may be important in the development of their self-perceived ability. Past literature indicates that it is
important for individual performing athletes to develop positive self-perceived attitudes such as self-efficacy, positivity, perseverance, and self-esteem, and that tattoos play a role in improving self-perception and uniqueness (Laborde et al., 2016; Swami, 2011). Previous literature and fighter's testimonies may indicate that for people who get tattoos, their tattoos may act as tools for consolidating internal images that are relevant to the development of a person's style and practice of BJJ. Many of the fighters got their first tattoos before leaving high school. Physically representing themselves has clearly been very important for all of them and is likely significantly related to athlete's self-perception both inside and outside of the sport. This is why the emphasis for externalizing one's phenotype should be on how externalizing the phenotype makes the athlete feel rather than how it makes them look. They share the social perception that tattoos portray toughness but what is most important is how “cool” or “badass” the athlete feels due to the relationship they have with the images, rather than how they think they are being perceived by their opponents and training partners. Their tattoos seem to influence the refinement of strong positive self-perceptions that may make them feel like they are tougher or more difficult to beat, and as a by-product, they appear tough and physically imposing to their competitors.

**Influencing the self**

Participants unanimously expressed two ideas. Firstly, the most common tattoos in BJJ were either club affiliations, tattoos that represent the progression from one belt to another, and the words Jiu Jitsu. Secondly, each expressed that the sport is inherently profound in its effects on an athlete’s sense of self.

The participants explained that Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is a multifaceted sport that allows people to experience meaning in many different ways. A BJJ athlete can be a hobbyist, a competitor; they can train even in the later years of their life, it can be passed on to their
children, and although it is an individual sport, it has a strong sense of community. One participant explained that it can fill a spiritual void by giving their lives purpose because it interweaves with so many areas of one’s life. Another participant suggests that the sport is a medium for change. The amount of training and time required to progress through the ranks creates an experience that profoundly influences the athlete’s personal development. It is believed that when someone is training BJJ, they are discovering who they are by learning how they prefer to fight and what unique approaches they need to take to be successful. Due to such a heavy influence, the fighters believe that this is why these tattoos are the most popular. By getting a tattoo of the club, the level of the belt they are, or the words jiu jitsu, they are paying their respect to the place and the community that provided them with the opportunity to grow and develop, celebrating an otherwise invisible achievement, and showing publicly what they are capable of as a trained martial artist.

Most fighters believed that getting a BJJ-related tattoo was something that a person should only do once they knew they would be practicing the sport for the rest of their life. One participant equated getting an affiliation tattoo, belt level, or the words jiu jitsu as a type of rite of passage, which symbolizes that at some point, the sport became a permanent part of their life. However, other participants indicated that a large amount of training was not necessary to know whether the sport would be permanent for them. Although their decision to get a tattoo early may be somewhat controversial, fighters who had gotten tattoos early knew subjectively that the sport would be a part of their lives forever. After getting the tattoo and progressing further in belt levels, participants reported experiencing increasing amounts of joy from these tattoos. Because of the time that they had spent improving at the sport, they began feeling freer to demonstrate how much BJJ was a part of their lives.
Influencing the Self: Analysis and Interpretation

BJJ is described as being an intense and truthful sport that profoundly influences the people who do it, and tattoos can work as a medium to reveal how and in what ways it is influential.

Participants expressed that the sport is significant because the experience itself is quite challenging and promotes profound mental growth. They also expressed that it is very versatile because it can be meaningful to many people in many different ways. Due to the profound experience the sport creates and its versatility, meaning is also seemingly expressed in participant tattoos in many different but related ways. The most typical ways people express their meaning is by getting tattoos of the club they belong to, their position amongst the belt progression, or the words Jiu Jitsu. These tattoos align with Carmen et al.’s (2012) three categories that list the representation of group membership as the second category for the most reoccurring tattoo motivations across cultures historically. In other participants, training BJJ seemed to promote the identification with warrior-related imagery. These themes were less common than the aforementioned affiliation tattoos but were common enough. They included weaponry such as tomahawks, arrowheads, guns, explosives, and the warrior archetype itself. Their proclivity toward the warrior archetype is likely easily explained by the sheer amount of time they spend practicing how to navigate violent situations, much like a warrior would.

On the other hand, some participants had tattoos that do not relate to BJJ, but as their training and passion for the sport have intensified, their tattoos have gone on to include additional meaning in BJJ. However, their meaning only seems to double if the participant had been actively and heavily engaged with the sport at the time of the interview. Although the other
participants had engaged with the sport for more than ten years previously, the amount that their non-BJJ-related tattoos related to BJJ was minimal, and the impact BJJ had on who they were was primarily represented in BJJ-specific tattoos such as an affiliation tattoo. However, heavily active fighters showed signs of ascribing multiple meanings to all of their tattoos, regardless of what they were originally intended to be. Even some tattoos, such as a piece of toast, which was intended to be shared with his significant other, now also serves as a joke while he fights. The joke being that this cartoon piece of toast is the last thing his opponents see before he performs specific submissions. In other cases, some religious and mythological symbols represented more than one meaning. A Jesus statue depicting the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio represented both the fighter's devotion to Christianity and their love for BJJ. Another participant expressed interest in mythology, horror, and comic books. One of their interests was with deities known to instill fear, such as the boogie man, so their tattoo is a nod to their interest in this archetype in mythology, horror and comic books and an image to draw strength from in his BJJ practice.

In fighters who had multiple meanings associated with their tattoos, they explained that initially, they would typically have an image in their mind that resonated with them, but the tattoo would have little meaning beyond their intuitive interest in the symbol. However, after having non-BJJ-related tattoos for some time, these same tattoos began to take on meanings beyond what they had intended. As they continued to train and dedicate more time to BJJ, their love and passion for the sport increased, and the already existing images on their bodies became more relevant to their practice of the sport whether they originally intended them to or not. Had the other participants been as actively engaged with the sport as the others, perhaps they too would have explained how their other tattoos were relevant to their fighting experience.
Discussion

Going into this study, we asked four essential questions to better illustrate the phenomenon of meaning and tattoos with Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes. The research questions included:

1. Is there a specific relationship between Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes and the meaning of their tattoos?
2. Do Tattoos affect athlete performance in any way?
3. Does the Sport influence the athlete’s decision to get a tattoo?
4. Does the sport Influence the contents of the tattoo?

Firstly and secondly, there seems to be a specific relationship that Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes share with their tattoos that are also involved in the effect of their performance. The tattooed BJJ competitors in our study have described how they draw strength from their tattoos while in a fight, and they have described how they develop their practice through clarifying internal images. Both played significant roles in inducing emotionally and technically appropriate responses to specific circumstances in fighting and the development and integrity of their fighting mentality as individual sports athletes.

The previous descriptions are essential, especially in the area of research questioning the utility of tattoos concerning athlete performance, because their description may indicate the direction in which tattoos may be affecting performance. Perhaps tattoos are not directly responsible for the individual performances of the athlete but are partially responsible for the way that the athlete has navigated to higher and higher levels of mastery. The direction of effect
seems to begin as an internal intuition for an image that may be useful to the fighter, and the process of realizing it as a tattoo brings it out externally. The internal to the external direction of effect could explain why there was no significant advantage for tattooed athletes in the world cup because, for the tattooed athletes, the physical representation of their symbols may have been partially responsible for the maturation of the skill level they have already achieved.

Thirdly, athlete descriptions revealed in great detail how the sport's profound nature seemed to influence the athlete's decisions to get tattoos considerably. Fourthly, the sport partially influenced the content of the tattoos, and its influence is evident in the tattoos that athletes received to represent the sport's impact on their sense of self, especially regarding the athlete's proclivity toward martial-themed tattoos. One complication regarding the sports influence on the content of the tattoos is whether or not the tattoos that participants received originated from the sports' influence, or if the contents of the tattoo began with the athlete's intuition about the image they want on their body.

Interestingly, there was quite a difference between competitive participants and less active participants in the sport. Competitors seemed to position BJJ more than the other athletes at the center of their lives. Increased involvement also seemed to promote an increase in applying meaning to seemingly irrelevant tattoos. For the future of this area of research, it would be interesting to investigate if, how, and why tattoo meanings are applied differently between participants who claimed to have more of a lifestyle approach to BJJ rather than a career approach. All participants were also mixed martial artists with experience in many different fighting disciplines. In addition to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, those disciplines included Muay Thai, Kickboxing, Greco-roman wrestling, Olympic wrestling, Sambo, Judo, and Boxing. Although
this study is contained to active Brazilian Jiu Jitsu athletes, the results may be relevant to other disciplines, including competing mixed-martial artists, because the results reflect the experience of being a tattooed fighter rather than exclusively being a tattooed BJJ athlete. Investigating fighters with tattoos who fight for a living or own a gym may provide greater insight into how tattoo meanings multiply.

**Limitations**

Significant limitations to this study were issues involving diversity. All participants were residents of Saskatchewan. Without efforts to pull participants in from other areas outside of Saskatchewan, the themes that emerged to explain the phenomenon in focus may only represent the experiences of martial artists in Saskatchewan. Additionally, this study was limited in its gender diversity. All participants were white men. Further research should emphasize the inclusion of a more diverse population.
References

https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2019.1679545


https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027908


