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Finnish-themed Tattoos in North America

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Readers may be interested in the findings of a project that was undertaken in early 2016 that examined the apparent popularity of Finnish-themed tattoos among the Finnish ethnic group in North America. With four of my own children who obtained Finnish-themed tattoos as a sibling bonding event in Christmas 2013, and a 2015 encounter with a Finnish-Canadian customs officer at the Winnipeg International Airport who also had a tattoo on her wrist, I started a project that appeared to be of interest to many people.

A few responses were received in early 2016 from newspapers such as *The Finnish American Reporter* and *Kanadan Sanomat* that had published my request for feedback on the topic, but the majority of responses came from making my work known through the social media involving Facebook. In order to collect information through Facebook, a short 10-question survey was posted on SurveyMonkey and request for photos were sent to 32 Finnish-related Facebook groups during the study period of Jan.9-Feb.13, 2016. Within two days, I had obtained 19 (54%) responses and within four days, a total of 28 (80%) responses had been received. In addition to responses, nearly 100 individuals expressed that they "liked" the post shared on Facebook.

Respondents were located across the United States and Canada, with four states domi-

nating. California was home to 7 respondents, followed by Michigan (5), Ohio (3), Illinois (3), Indiana (2), and Wisconsin (2). There were also two respondents who were located in Finland!

The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 77, and the average age of the sample was 39.8 years of age. The survey reached all age groups, with the 20–29 year olds and 40–49 year olds dominating with a combined total of 57% of the sample. The generational representation was quite striking as well. A total of 35.3% of the sample involved 3rd generation respondents, followed by 1st generation respondents (26.5%) and 4th generation respondents (20.6%).

Getting a Finnish-themed tattoo was a first-time tattoo experience for 58% of respondents, while for 15% of respondents this was a second tattoo, followed by 6% for whom this was a third tattoo. For 6% this was a fourth tattoo, and for 15% of respondents, this was a sixth tattoo.

Based on the data collected, the most common Finnish-themed tattoo is the word "sisu". This single word was the tattoo chosen by 15 (45%) respondents, while two others included "sisu" as part of a larger tattoo that reflected Finnishness. Overall, a total of 52% of all respondents have "sisu" on their skin. Surprisingly, for 11 (33%) respondents, "sisu" was the first tattoo they had inked.

Others for whom being inked with a tattoo was a first-time experience, Finnish themes



Sisu tattoos dominate in tattoo choice.

included the lily of the valley or a leaf/plant (3), the Finnish flag (1), the Finnish lion (1), the Saint Hannes cross (1), the Finland FIFA logo (1), or some word or name with significant meaning (2). Several respondents also included other items in combination with the major themes, including imagery of Lapland, Northern Lights, Finnish flag, map of the Upper Peninsula and the Canadian Maple Leaf.

Why would anyone get a Finnish-themed tattoo? This really was the primary question of this research, and the best way to share some

of the qualitative results is to share some of the responses that are highly personal in nature for each respondent.

"Living abroad makes you appreciate your native country much more and respect your roots. The lion symbolizes my love and appreciation for my "motherland." The flying V guitar symbolizes my love for heavy metal music (especially Finnish heavy metal)." (Finnish lion and flying V-guitar on a 40-year old female, 1st generation from California, with one previous tattoo).



Permissions received from all respondents to publish photos.



"I wanted to represent both sides of my nationality." ("Maple leaf & Finnish flag" tattoo on a 26-year old, 2nd generation from Alberta, with 4 previous tattoos).

"I got the word SISU tattooed on my left wrist so that my watch would cover it up. The tattoo was for me only, for times when I personally needed to call upon my SISU, or perseverance in the face of an adversity. It has been a comfort to me when I have needed it. I did not get it as a show piece for others to observe, but for my personal use." ("Sisu" tattoo on a 77-year old male, 3rd generation from Ohio, with no previous tattoos).

"I got the tattoo to represent my family's heritage and I wanted to fly the flag on my forearm so that when I cross my hand to my heart, it shows my tattoo with my pride." ("Perhe" [Family] tattoo on a 27-year old male, 4th generation from Michigan with no previous tattoos).

Several responses were received on a question that asked the reaction of family members to the tattoos. A total of 19 (56%) of respondents noted that family members "loved it". While a majority of respondents shared positive reactions to their tattoos, eight respondents (23.5%) reported that the first reactions towards the tattoo was not positive. Family members were negative, but with time, attitudes for all have changed. Finally, four respondents noted pride (9%) and inspiration (3%) as being the reaction of family members.

While the history of tattoos in the past has maintained more negative attitudes, many of these barriers seem to be disappearing. It seems that in North America there is a distinct appreciation for ethnic identity in a more tangible way, and for some it involves the tattoo

artist's work and the desire of the individual being inked.

"In Florida, everyone asked me just what the heck it meant...lol No problems, everyone seems to like it and smiles about it here in my home town." ("sisu" tattoo on a 62-year old 3rd generation in Michigan, with no previous tattoos).

"I feel like we are at a time where tattoos are generally accepted in society now. I've had numerous people compliment me on the tattoo and really starts a conversation with other people of Finnish heritage." ("Finnish flag & UP map" tattoo on a 24-year old 4th generation in Michigan, with four previous tattoos).

The final question of the survey asked about the possible interest that respondents might have in terms of their interest in tattoo related events at ethnic festivals such as the FinnFest? A total of 26 (74.2%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could meet others who have Finnish-themed tattoos. Twenty-two respondents (62.6%) would appreciate learning more about Finnish-themed tattoos; while twenty-seven respondents (77.1%) believe they could meet younger people and younger generation Finns at festivals; and 23 (65.7%) would be interested in getting inked at a festival!

What can be gleaned from all this information? Without additional research and more detail, it is difficult to make any real conclusions. The simple truth is that there are many new ways in which individuals can and will identify themselves and promote their ethnicity, and it may be a good time to investigate tattoos and their growing importance among some people in appreciating their Finnish ethnic identity.