

Having a tattoo of your lover's name has been a bad idea for hundreds of years

February 12 2018, by Stephen Crabbe



An illustration of Japanese courtesans by Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825), with one courtesan showing another the tattoo on her upper arm. Credit: Prints of Japan

Every Valentine's Day we are reminded about the importance of showing our commitment to our lovers – whether we are married to them or not. For some people this might mean getting a tattoo of their lover's name (or initials).

No figures are available about the number of people who choose to

demonstrate their commitment in this way. But a quick online search will yield tens of thousands of images, videos, discussions and opinion pieces about getting a lover's name tattooed, dating someone with a tattoo of an ex-lover's name and the ubiquitous [curse of the name tattoo](#). According to this curse, getting a tattoo of a lover's name dooms a relationship.

The sheer number of posts on social media suggests that this is a much sought-after expression of commitment. And [recent research](#) backs this up, finding that a common reason for wanting a tattoo is to pay tribute to a partner.

Celebrity ink lovers certainly seem to have caught on to it. Among the best-known are David and Victoria Beckham. Victoria got the initials "DB" on her left wrist in 2009, and David got "Victoria" on his right hand in 2013, as tattooed symbols (two of many) of their commitment to each other and their relationship.

True to the era of sharing that we find ourselves in, celebrities are quick to display any new tattoos for their fans. Just recently, socialite Paris Hilton took to Instagram to share with her 7.2m followers her actor lover Chris Zylka's new tattoo of "Paris" on his left arm.



Paris Hilton's post on Instagram. Credit: Instagram

Enduring symbol

Such demonstrations of commitment date back many centuries. For example, in 18th-century Japan – a period considered to be the golden age for tattooing in the country – a female courtesan might show her commitment to a male lover by having his name tattooed on her upper arm.

And, often the Japanese word for life (*inochi*) would be tattooed alongside the lover's name to signify the courtesan's hope that the commitment would be of the death-do-us-part kind.

A male lover might also have the name of his favourite courtesan tattooed on his [upper arm](#). Such acts satirised at the time in the 1785 comic book *Playboy Roasted a la Edo* (*Edo umare uwaki no kabayaki*) by [Santō Kyōden](#). This follows the comic misadventures of a wannabe playboy called Enjiro. The narrative reads:



A woodblock print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) of a Japanese courtesan biting a napkin in pain as she has a tattoo on her upper arm. Credit: Wikipedia Commons

Enjiro hears that tattoos elicit illicit affairs, so he immediately has his arms covered with the names of 20 or 30 fictitious lovers, all the way down to the crooks of his fingers. Enduring the agony, he rejoices...

Enduring love?

The biggest problem with getting a tattoo of a lover's name hasn't changed either. In the 18th century, like today, not all relationships lasted a lifetime. And when the [commitment](#) between the lovers ended, the tattoos were no longer desired.



Woodblock print by Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864) of a courtesan biting a napkin in pain as she has a tattoo burnt off her upper arm with the herb mugwort. Credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

They could, of course, be removed. [Two methods](#) used in 18th-century Japan were to burn them off with the bowl of a tobacco pipe or to burn them off with [dried mugwort leaves](#) (which are very inflammable). However, either method would almost certainly have been painful. And both methods would likely have left permanent scars to remind the lovers of their failed relationship.

Fortunately, modern methods of tattoo removal no longer necessitate burning off tattoos. However, [one of the main reasons](#) people get a tattoo removed nowadays is because they have broken up with their lover. According to Premier Laser Clinic after a five-year study, the most regretted [tattoo](#) (and the one most frequently removed) by customers at their clinics was [an ex's name](#).

"When your personal life is as volatile as Katie Price's it is perhaps not the wisest move to have your husband's name tattooed on your arm. We have had celebrities in our London clinics quietly erasing tattoos of former lovers made in haste. Without a doubt, the most common tattoo that we remove at Premier Laser Clinic is an ex-partner's name - we would advise people to think long and carefully before inking their lover's name onto their skin. If you do make a mistake, it has never been easier to remove an unwanted tattoo and we can leave the skin looking almost brand new. The procedure is quick and pain-free."

Premier Laser Clinic Limited's advertising for their tattoo removal service.
Credit: Premier Laser Clinic Limited

Certainly, many current celebrity ink lovers (Mel B, Melanie Griffith, Kylie Jenner and Heidi Klum to name just a few) have found that their tattoos of lovers' names [lasted longer than their relationships](#).

Their feelings at the time of breaking up possibly similar to that of actress [Angela Jolie](#) who, on breaking up with actor Billy Bob Thornton, stated: "I'll never be stupid enough to have a man's name tattooed on me again."

And so, having already spanned centuries and continents, the problem with inking a lover's name on your body continues to endure.

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