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The Alternative/Indie Archetype: Stick n Poke Tattoos

David Bachofer, Volunteer Reporter

Tattoos are a topic that can truly get under peoples' skin. Those who consider this kind of permanent bodily augmentation are signing up to eternally showcase a piece of art. While piercings are also typically lumped in as bodily modifications, jewelry can be taken out, and, depending on the age of the piercing, the hole can still heal back. When stepping into that small parlor with large blocky fonts, it comes with an underlying knowledge that you may soon be sitting on a leather chair, anxiously listening to mechanical buzzing.

With tattoos becoming a more common occurrence in our society, they have become entrenched in the Alternative (Alt)/Indie persona. Remaining somewhat frowned upon while simultaneously gaining popularity, tattoos are an in(k)stinctual choice when defining oneself. It should be noted that Alt/Indie tattoos stand out in a way that no other tattoos do. There are four things I have identified that can qualify a tattoo as Alt/Indie: the method of tattooing, the style of artwork, the subject and the location of the tattoo.

Early tattoos were made by tapping or lightly piercing the skin with a needle and ink. The needle would come away from the skin, and surface tension would pull the ink below. The repeated process leaves clumps of ink, which form images under the skin. As the tattoo surfaces, it would become visible. This method of repeatedly managing a single needle is known as stick and poke. More common on college campuses, students looking for cheap tattoos may seek out on-campus artists with needles and ink.

While stick and poke tattoos can be subject to fading, so can tattoos left by common tattoo machines. This is due to the nature of the ink itself, not the tattooing method. The inks are inserted within the body as a liquid, but they coagulate quickly. Over time, these inks can become more aqueous and drift from their initial placement. This can cause deflation of tattooed images and fading, as color leaves ground zero for your permanent art addition. Stick and poke needles that are pushed too deep into the skin can cause the ink to disperse more easily. Not going deep enough can also fail to leave ink stuck in the skin.

Stick and poke tattoos are a cheap alternative to tattoo guns in parlors. For this reason, knowledge of stick and poke tattoos are essential to the Alt/Indie persona. Having stick and poke tattoos, however, it is not a requirement. While having a stick and poke tattoo will elevate your Alt/Indie status, all that is required is to know at least one person who can give stick and poke tattoos. Knowing or being able to reference someone within your social circles proves that you are a part of the Indie community. Offhand, I can easily name four friends of mine who do stick and poke tattoos. Going above and beyond, I can also name two people who have a tattoo gun and would offer to use it.



There are many styles of tattoos, but what makes a tattoo more alternative than not? A tattoo of a mountain goat might look different if done in an illustrative tattoo style or traditional American style. With each style possessing certain qualities, the tattoo comes to life through its style.

In traditional style, bold lines and bright colors abound. In illustrative tattoos, there is a movement towards abstraction and fine line work. I find that the abstract options, which come about in illustrative styles, tend to afford more indie clout. While the subject of a mountain goat might be strange enough to be alternative on its own, the art style can also lend itself to qualifying for an Alt/Indie title. The manner in which strange fever dreams can be captured upon the skin allows the indie community to display their strange and otherwise unexplainable visions of dice with legs. The stranger the subject, the more alternative it becomes. Amalgamations of common household objects, along with personified qualities, are generally a good place to start.

Appreciating the placement of tattoos is also essential. Anyone can get a piece along their forearm or on the shoulder, but in my experience, Alt/Indie tattoos gravitate towards locations which are harder to immediately notice. I would say that, while not all indie tattoos are around joints, more often than not, they are. One common example would be about an inch above the elbow. The space on the back of the arm, above the knee and other major joints could be dominated by large pieces. But instead, small pieces adorn the body, and the minimalist artwork draws attention to the otherwise massive space.

While I personally have received stick and poke tattoos and condone getting tattoos, I must issue a warning. Permanent bodily augmentation is to be taken seriously, as the effects are (that's right!) permanent. With that noted, tattoo to your heart's content and display your Indie/Alt persona through the canvas on your skin.

What is your favorite tattoo you've gotten? Was it a stick and poke? In the following week we'll hope the planets align and discuss astrology. Any questions, comments, concerns, or existential crises can be sent to dbach.magiccows@gmail.com. As an English (and maybe eventually Philosophy) major, I love to write and trade theories of the universe with others.