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#GetInked: An Anthropological Exploration of Tattooing and Social Media

Abstract

This thesis aims to address two inquiries regarding contemporary tattooing. The first goal is to explore how social media has changed the practice of tattooing while the second goal is to examine how tattoos are used to express or explore the differing facets of a person's identity. Identity theory, social identity theory, semiotics, and the concepts of stigma and deviancy form the theoretical framework which allows one to understand the ways in which tattoos can provide insights into the various aspects of someone's identity as well as how social media can influence members of the tattoo community. An online survey, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation were utilized to investigate the research questions. When analyzing the collected data, it became clear that social media is an influential force and valuable tool for members of the tattoo community to use when they are making decisions about their next tattoo and when they seek to engage with tattoo culture and each other outside of tattoo shops and conventions. Additionally, the data displayed how even tattoos that were not designed with a specific purpose in mind are still important as they allow for the tattooed person to shape the way in which they perceive themselves and are perceived by others, which can improve their confidence and self-esteem. The information presented within this thesis is significant in that it fills two gaps that were identified within academic research on tattoos while also displaying how advances in technology have impacted those who engage with the tattoo industry, culture, and community.

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#GetInked: An Anthropological Exploration of Tattooing and Social Media

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Delanee Taylor

March 2024

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Walking around every day, one may not know if the person next to them has a hidden piece of artwork beneath their clothing. When scrolling on social media platforms though, one can find numerous pictures of people showing off their latest ink, or artists posting their newest designs. Whether they are highly visible or not, it seems as though everyone has a tattoo these days. Each of these tattoos carry a story, whether it lies in the design, the process of getting the ink, or simply the decision to get a tattoo. With more people joining the tattoo community every day, social media seems to have become a home for individuals to show off their work, and the visibility of the community has steadily risen. As a result of this increase in tattoo-related content across social media platforms, there are more Americans than ever seeking out tattoos, resulting in a population where over 145 million people in the U.S. have at least one tattoo (Wise 2023). Additionally, it has become easier for people to locate shops and artists as well as find inspiration for their next piece. I find this intersection of tattoo culture and social media to be intriguing, especially as someone who has personally utilized social media platforms in the ways that are mentioned above. The reasonings behind people's ink is also fascinating given that tattoos can be used to express a variety of aspects about a person's life and their identity.

This thesis is a two-part investigation that aims to understand how social media has impacted the tattoo industry and to learn about how people are using tattoos as a way to express themselves. Hence, my thesis utilizes two main research questions and secondary questions, with the first questioning how social media has changed the practice of tattooing. My thesis also aims to explore how social media is being used when people seek out tattoo-related content. The second main research question focuses on investigating how tattoos are used to express or explore the differing facets of a person's identity as well as to establish how the meaning and significance of one's tattoos may change as they add more ink to their body. In order to answer both of these questions, a mixed-methods approach became necessary. Through an online survey, semi-structure interviews, and participant observation, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed. As the findings of this study will display, people who are already have permanent artwork as well as those who are looking to become inked in the future are both turning to social media to find tattoo-related content, indicating how valuable these platforms have become to the tattoo industry and the tattoo community. The results of this thesis also demonstrate that although there are different reasons that exist behind someone's ink, the tattoos that a person has are all important in some way, even if their value may not be understood by others.

When speaking with tattoo artists about how the industry has recently shifted, many of them agreed that these changes occur when there are advancements in technology. Previously, this referred to new tools that artists could use as well as the inclusion of tattoo-oriented content in media, such as television shows and tattoo

magazines, which has been discussed by tattoo researchers such as Margo DeMello. The most recent of these advancements in technology that has impacted the tattoo industry is the rise of social media. While social media has caused major shifts in thousands of businesses, little research has been done in terms of investigating how the popularity of these sites has changed the tattoo industry. This is why tattoo researchers such as William Ryan Force are calling for more studies to be done on platforms such as Instagram and other online social worlds, saying “Whatever the analytic or methodological approach, future research on tattoo culture-as well as other cultures, subcultures, communities and scenes- would benefit by attending to the myriad ways in which social media extend and interact with our experiences IRL” (Ryan Force 2020). Given that social media is continuing to grow at a rapid pace, this research is relevant in that it focuses on exploring how using these platforms and having an online presence can have an impact on one’s offline life through influencing their decision-making practices. At the same time, this research will help fill the gap that has been identified by Force with regards to there being a lack of academic research that focuses on tattooing and social media.

Additionally, there are many tattoo researchers who have published pieces that seek to explore the meanings behind people’s ink. Some researchers like Lee Barron have studied how their permanent artwork may be representative of specific times in their life or various experiences that they have had, while others such as Michael Atkinson have focused their research on examining how some people choose to have tattoos as a way to symbolize their sense of difference from mainstream society. While these are important aspects of tattooing that should continue to be studied and discussed, there seems to be a

gap in research when it comes to discussing how that meaning and significance of tattoos can change. Thus, my research is significant in that it fills this gap of research by exploring how human behavior and decision-making processes could change the more that someone permanently alters their body.

1.1: Overview of the Structure

In the following chapter, I provide essential background information regarding tattooing and social media. This chapter establishes how old the practice of tattooing is by explaining how the archaeological record and written records have been utilized to learn about tattooing in ancient cultures, providing a global history of the practice up to the 1700s. A history of tattooing in the Western World is given, followed by a discussion of how tattooing became more popular in the United States by the 1800s. There are also mentions of how technological advancements in the industry changed not only the practice of tattooing itself but also caused shifts in the way that tattoos were perceived by popular society. Tattoo trends that existed in each decade in the United States are described, and the section ends by discussing the emergence of tattooing within popular media. The second part of this chapter addresses the history of social media, beginning with a short discussion of how the creation of the internet and public access to the World Wide Web resulted in the creation of social media networks. Histories of the social media platforms that were specifically utilized in this research are included as well as information regarding the current popularity of these sites, ending in a discussion of how tattoos have become a popular topic across these digital spaces.

Chapter three contains the literature review for this thesis. It begins by discussing the works of notable tattoo researchers and includes information regarding the specific aspects of tattooing that each research was focused on, such as the tattoo community and the association of body modification with the concepts of stigma and deviancy. The chapter then shifts to discussing the studies that have been done on social media and contemporary tattooing, displaying how this is an under-developed area of tattoo-related research. In the second section of this chapter, the theories that were used to create the theoretical framework of this thesis are discussed, including explanations of what fields these theories originated from and how they have been applied by anthropologists. This is followed by an explanation of why these theories each played a significant role in the creation of this thesis and how they shaped my understanding of contemporary tattooing.

Chapter four of this thesis discusses the methods that were used to gather both the quantitative and qualitative data that were utilized. It begins by explaining how an online survey was created to answer the first main research question of this thesis. This section includes a description of the questions that the survey respondents were asked, as well as mentioning how the survey was distributed through multiple social media sites. The following section describes how semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gain information to answer the second main research goal that was posed in this thesis and includes a description of the questions that interviewees were asked as well as establishes who the target interview participants were. The chapter also includes a brief description of how interview data is used to perform thematic analysis as well as information regarding the steps that were taken to process the data. The last data

collection method that was used is participant observation, which was conducted in four tattoo parlors as well as at the Seattle Tattoo Exposition in August of 2022. Another section in this chapter considers my positionality as a tattooed person conducting research on the tattoo industry, followed by the last section the chapter which focused on the ethical considerations that were taken to protect the collected data as well as identity and privacy of both the survey and interview participants. Ending this chapter is a discussion of the three main limitations that affected my research.

Chapter five focuses on the findings of the online survey, the semi-structured interviews, and the participant observation that was conducted. The first section of this chapter focuses on the results of the survey and breaks down the responses that were given. The second part of this chapter focuses on thematic analysis and draws from the semi-structured interviews as well as information that was collected while conducting participant observation to explore how people are using their tattoos to express different aspects of their identity. The interviews were also analyzed to learn more about how the current tattoo industry and community has changed as a result of tattoos becoming more accepted by mainstream society.

Chapter six is a discussion of what the results of the data means with regards to answering the two main research questions that this thesis aims to answer. This chapter also seeks to display how viewing the results within the contexts of the theories that were described in chapter three is necessary in order to fully understand what the results of this study mean. The chapter ends with a discussion of how there are disagreements regarding whether changes in tattoo world as a result of social media have been beneficial, or if

they have given rise to an industry that no longer has an authentic tattoo culture or community.

Chapter seven of this thesis serves as a conclusion to the research project. In addition to summarizing the results of this study, the chapter also reinforces why this study is significant and how it addresses two gaps that were found within academic research on tattoos. Finally, the section offers insights into possible directions that future research on contemporary tattooing could take, which were unfortunately outside of the scope of this specific thesis.

1.2: A Note on the Terminology

Finally, I feel that it is important that I address the specific terminology that will be used throughout this thesis to ensure that there is no confusion about what these terms are referring to when they are used. The first term that must be defined before proceeding with the reading of this thesis is “mainstream.” According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, mainstream is defined as being “a prevailing current or direction of activity or influence,” and can be used to describe something as “having, reflecting, or being compatible with the prevailing attitudes and values of a society or a group” (Merriam-Webster 2024). This word has been used by multiple tattoo researchers, including William Ryan Force and Enid Schildkrout, and is used as a way to refer to the views that a certain culture or society has with regards to tattooing and permanent body modification. Throughout this thesis, the term mainstream will be used to discuss how tattooing went from being a practice that was stigmatized to being seen as an artform that many people are embracing.

“Popular” is another term that will be seen in various places in this thesis. Although it has multiple definitions, in the case of this thesis, popular will be used to refer to something that is “Frequently encountered or widely accepted,” and is “commonly liked or approved” (Merriam-Webster 2024). This is another term that tattoo researchers like Michael Rees and Lee Barron have used similar to the way that mainstream has as a way to explain how tattoos have become normalized in the United States and people are often not considered as being a social outcast if they have ink on their bodies.

Lastly, there are a few places throughout chapters two and three where the terms “Western society,” “Western world,” and “Western culture” are used, and I felt that it was critical that I explain exactly what these terms are referring to and how they will be used in these chapters. The Western world typically is used as a way to refer to the regions of Northern America Western Europe, and Australasia, although there can be slight changes to this depending on what period of history one is referring to (Shvili 2021). In this thesis, the use of the term Western will be used to refer specifically to Northern America and Western Europe. This word was chosen because it has also been used by prominent tattoo researchers such as Margo DeMello and Clinton Sanders, who have utilized the term to specifically refer to the cultures and societal norms of these regions in order to discuss how tattoos have been viewed by the people in these places.

Chapter 2: Historical Background

Given that this thesis explores tattooing and social media, in this chapter I provide an overview of the history of both topics. Focusing first on tattoos, this chapter begins with a description of how archaeological evidence and written records have been used to learn about tattooing in various ancient cultures. Following this is a discussion of how tattoos were introduced into Western societies during the 1700s, and how they were originally perceived as signs of exoticism and primitivism. By the 1800s, tattoos spread across the Atlantic Ocean and became popular in the United States amongst those of the upper class. Afterwards there is a brief mention of how advancements in tattooing technology brought change not only to the practice of tattooing itself but also how it led to changes in societal perceptions. The section then shifts to focusing only on tattooing within the United States, with explanations of how tattooing was viewed throughout the 1900s by popular society. Trends that existed in each decade are described, including explorations of how these styles became associated with specific communities and subcultural groups. The section ends with discussing how tattoos emerged within popular media.

In the second part of this chapter, I mention the history of the Internet and how public access to the World Wide Web led to the creation of social media networks. This is followed by an explanation of the histories for the social media platforms that are

specifically discussed in this thesis as well as information regarding their current popularity among social media users. The chapter ends with a discussion regarding how tattoos have become a popular topic across various digital spaces.

2.1: History of Tattooing

2.1.1: Tattooing in Ancient Societies

As a form of body modification, tattooing is one of the oldest expressions of human artistry. Throughout history and various cultures, tattoos have been used in a variety of ways, including functioning as forms of community building, identity construction, and establishing a sense of belonging, which are often seen as vital aspects of being humans. To establish how old the art of tattooing is, archaeological evidence in the form of artwork can be used to estimate when certain cultures across the world adopted the practice. The earliest example of tattoos being utilized in artwork were found in clay figurines that have been painted or engraved to potentially represent permanent body modification (Olsen 2010). An example of this comes from excavation sites across the Near East and Southeastern Europe, terra-cotta figurines were found by archaeologists in pits near settlements as well as in graves and cenotaphs that contained high-value artifacts. Researchers noted that these figures which were created between the sixth and fifth millennia BCE, were decorated with incised or painted ornamentation, which "...likely provides a glimpse into the repertoire of possible motifs and compositions that could have been rendered as temporary or permanent body art" (Zidarov 2017, 141).

One way that archaeologists have tried to determine when tattooing was performed in certain cultures is by studying the tools that may have been used. Petar Zidarov notes in his chapter of *Ancient Ink* called “The Antiquity of Tattooing in Southeastern Europe” that the tools used for applying tattoos could be made from a variety of materials, including thorns from wild plants as well as antlers and bones from various animals. In fact, there is some archaeological evidence that suggests bone needles may have been used for tattooing in the Balkans during the Late Copper Age by the people who lived in a settlement near Pietrele, Romania, on the shore of the Danube River between 4500 and 4200 BCE (Zidarov 2017, 145). In addition to finding traces of pigments such as red ochre as well as blood on the surfaces of some of the tools that were recovered from the Pietrele Site, evidence suggested that individual bone needles may have been used as tattoo implements. Bundles of needles that were shaped to form combs were also discovered at the site, and researchers suggested that they could have been used to create wide lines or infill solid areas. This led archaeologists to hypothesize that there may have been “specialized tattoo ‘masters’” at this settlement (Zidarov 2017, 145-148). Although evidence such as artwork and tools are vital when it comes to learning more about the history of tattooing, it is important to remember that a level of interpretation has been used in these cases, meaning that archaeologists can only make hypotheses in these cases and are not able to confirm that these needles were used for tattooing. The only true way to establish how long tattooing has been practiced is by finding physical evidence that has been preserved on human skin.

Hundreds of tattooed human bodies that are both naturally and deliberately preserved have been discovered across the globe. Representing a variety of cultures throughout history, these remains have been found in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Currently, the world's oldest tattoos have been found on the remains of a 5,300-year-old naturally preserved mummy known as Ötzi the Iceman (see image 2.1). Ötzi, who died and was buried under an Alpine glacier near the Austrian-Italian border around 3250 B.C., was documented to have 61 tattoos across his body. Their locations near joints and the spine, which are common spots used in acupuncture, have led researchers to suggest the tattoos may have been performed for therapeutic or medicinal purposes to potentially treat joint-related diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis (Scallan 2015).

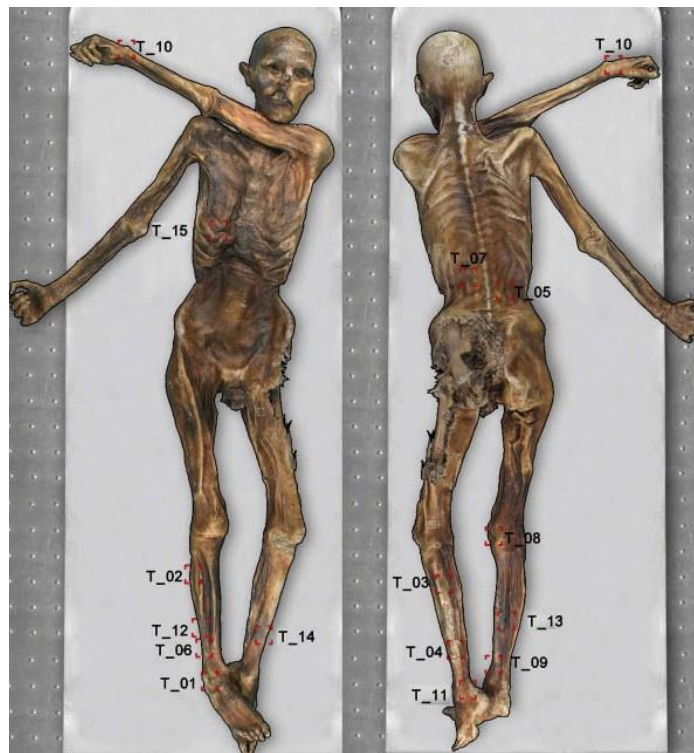


Figure 2.1 Ötzi the Iceman (from the Smithsonian Institute)

The world's second-oldest tattoo was found on a mummy from El Morro, Chile. Archaeologists have determined that the mummy is from the Chinchorro cultural group, which lasted from 7,000 to 1,100 BCE in the coastal region between northern Chile and southern Peru. Interestingly, this mummy, estimated to have died around 4000 BCE, was found to have a series of small black dots tattooed in a single line on either side of the upper lip, which led some researchers to describing the cosmetic tattoo as a "pencil thin mustache." If this tattoo was meant to represent a mustache, it would be the first example of humans modifying their bodies for cosmetic purposes (Deter-Wolf et al. 2016).

Additionally, multiple tattooed mummies have been recovered from various sites across Egypt. One of these was a woman named Amunet, who was buried within the funerary complex of King Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II, who ruled during the eleventh dynasty at the beginning of Egypt's Middle Kingdom (Friedman 2017, 22). Amunet was revealed to have been a "Chief Lady in Waiting" to the queen as well as a Priestess of the goddess Hathor in Thebes, which today is known as Dier el Behari. Although Amunet was buried between 2160 and 1994 BCE, her tattoos remained preserved, and archaeologists found that she had numerous dots and lines organized in certain patterns across various parts of her body (Friedman 2017, 23).

Another group of famously tattooed mummies comes from the Altai-Sayan Mountains on the border between Russia and China (Schildkrout 2004, 325-326). Known as the Pazyryk horsemen and women, these people belonged to a seminomadic pastoral population that lived in the mountains during the fourth and third centuries BCE. When studying the deliberately mummified bodies, researchers found that the tattoos were not

restricted to members of high nobility, and that the subject matter of the tattoos were similar. Interestingly, the characters and iconography of the Pazyryk tattoos were depicted on other items that were made of felt, leather, wood, and horn, such as horse equipment, masks, garments, and headdresses. This suggested that certain creatures and figures were culturally significant, leading researchers to believe that people in this culture were not tattooed with individual designs. Instead, they found that it was more likely that the tattoo designs denoted specific ruling clans or families, as well as potential mythological or spiritual powers and totem animals (see image 2.2). As a result of these findings, archaeologists such as Svetlana Pankova have mentioned that “Pazyryk tattoos may be considered as a kind of visual language in this nonliterate culture, because they seemingly communicated crucial information to members of the local society while also permanently marking the populace’s affiliation to it” (Pankova 2017, 89).



Figure 2.2 Example of Pazyryk Tattoos (from Ancient-Origins.net)

Tattoo researchers have also relied upon written records to determine how old tattooing is within certain regions, as well as to learn about the purposes that tattoos served in specific cultures. One example of this comes from Ancient Greece, where written records indicate that tattooing was practiced back in 5000 BCE. According to archaeologist Svetlana Pankova, accounts written by Greek and Latin authors described how tattooing was part of rites that were practiced by the Scythians, Thracians, Sarmatians, and other Iranian-speaking nomadic groups near the Northern Black Sea and surrounding areas (95-96). Other written accounts detail how slave owners in Ancient Greece and Rome would use tattoos to mark both slaves and criminals (Schildkrout 2004, 323). Additionally, around 460 BCE, Herodotus, a famous Greek historian and geographer, wrote about the tattoo practices of the Thracians, noting that "...to be tattooed is a sign of noble birth, while to bear no such marks is for the baser sort" (Zidarov 2017, 137). While there have since been critiques about the credibility of Herodotus' writing, his work is still considered to be among the first written evidence of voluntary tattooing within the written history of mankind (Zidarov 2017, 137).

Across Asia, tattoos were commonly used as punishment to publicly identify criminals. In Japan's recorded history, punitive tattooing occurred as early as the fifth century, although by the third century, Chinese written records mention that tattooing in Japan also denoted social class and were utilized as forms of protection against harmful sea creatures (Ashcraft and Benny 2016, 4). During the rise of Christianity in Europe, written accounts from the fifteenth century noted that crusaders would return from Jerusalem with tattoos that symbolized their dedication to God and their religious beliefs

(Osterud 2009, 7). By the beginning of the sixteenth century, written accounts of tattooing amongst the Picts, an ancient matrilineal pre-Celtic tribe from the British Isles, were included in published works. Although there is evidence of tattooing amongst the Pictish as well as the Celts in early documents dating back to the third century, interest in tattooed Native Americans led to a resurfacing of the fascination with Pictish tattooing and their frequent use of moons, stars, and animals within their designs (Osterud 2009, 12 and Ahlgren 2021).

2.1.2: Tattooing in the Western World From the 1700s to World War II

Although this form of body art has been practiced for thousands of years, the term “tattoo” was not introduced to Western society until July of 1769 when Captain James Cook and his sailors voyaged to the South Pacific. In Captain Cook’s ship journal, it was noted that “Men and women [of Tahiti] paint their bodies. In their language, this is known as ta-tu. They inject a black colour under their skin, leaving a permanent trace” (Sanders and Vail 2008, 14). In Tahitian, the word “ta-tu” meant to strike or to mark, and soon the term “tattoo” became used in the West. Additionally, some of the officers and sailors who had joined Captain Cook on the Endeavor decided to get tattoos from the Tahitian artists in order to commemorate their voyage (Sanders and Vail 2008, 14). During the late 1700s and early 1800s, tattooed people were also being presented to Western society as signs of exoticism. One of these people included Omai, a male individual Captain Cook’s fleet brought back with them from the island of Raiatea located near Tahiti. At this time in the Western world, tattoos were only seen on Indigenous people. Their tattoos came to be viewed as marks of savagery and primitivism due to the fact that there was resistance

against British rule by Indigenous people around the world. Omai became popular in England because his exotic looks appealed to British colonials who were actively trying to suppress Indigenous resistance. Thus, Indigenous tattooed people were displayed throughout Europe to represent "...the conquered and uncivilized Native whom the British were trying to either eliminate or assimilate" (Osterude 2009, 12). Similar practices later occurred in the United States during the late 1800s when tattooed Native Americans were presented alongside displays of "native villages" at world's fairs and museums as means of entertainment as well as to highlight the progressiveness of the Western world (DeMello 2000, 48-49).

By the 1800s, tattoo consumers in Europe mostly included sailors, craftsmen, members of the military, and aristocrats. In the 1850s, there were a few Europeans who became heavily tattooed, and they began to make a living by presenting themselves at exhibits as curiosities. As the nineteenth century came to an end, the interest in tattoos spread over to the United States where the upper class again took an interest in the artform (Sanders and Vail 2008, 16). It is important to note that tattoos had already existed amongst Indigenous cultures in North America, and there are ethnographic accounts from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that documented tattooing practices from various Native groups, particularly in the Southwestern part of the U.S. (Gillreath-Brown et al. 2019). However, before the artform became more popular within European societies, Indigenous tattoos were often regarded as symbols of savagery and were seen as a visual representation of primitivism by white colonists and settlers (DeMello 2000, 49). While many Westerners held negative perceptions towards

Indigenous body modifications, views towards tattooing shifted once elitists and members of higher social classes began to acquire their own permanent artwork after encountering tattoos during their travels to the far East and becoming fascinated with the practice.

The first tattoo shops began to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in both Europe and the U.S. near major cities and large ports (Osterud 2009, 15). In 1870, the first professional tattoo shop was opened in Manhattan, New York by Martin Hilderbrand, who was considered to be the first professional tattoo artist in the United States. Hildebrand was said to have tattooed many Confederates as well as Union soldiers during the Civil War before he moved to tattooing aristocratic women, who were looking for pretty and sentimental designs such as flowers and birds that could be hidden from the rest of society by the Victorian style of women's dress (Osterud 2009, 17). By the 1890s, other tattoos artists were emerging near Chatham Square, although they aimed to provide their services to the working-class people of New York (Sanders and Vail 2008, 16).

The world of tattooing was also radically changed at this time when tattoo artist Samuel O'Reilly invented and patented the first electric tattoo machine in 1891 while working in Hilderbrand's shop. His machine was battery-operated with a handheld motor and a rotating coil design that could control either a single needle or a row of up to five needles (see image 2.3). Referred to now as a tattoo gun, this machine could produce 3,000 pricks per minute, which was much more than the 150 to 200 pricks per minute that could be accomplished by hand with traditional tools and methods. In 1904, Charlie

Wagner, who was one of the most notable U.S. tattoo artists of the twentieth century, was able to receive a patent for his improved design of the tattoo gun (see image 2.4).

Wagner's tattoo gun had two electromagnetic coils that are set transversely to the tube and needle assembly, creating a design that is still used by many tattoo artists today. This invention allowed for greater diffusion of tattooing into society because the electric machine meant that customers were subjected to less pain, and it required less skill and experience for artists to use than the traditional hand methods of tattooing (Sanders and Vail 2000, 16-17). Thus, there was a dramatic increase in the number of tattoo artists and clients around the country.

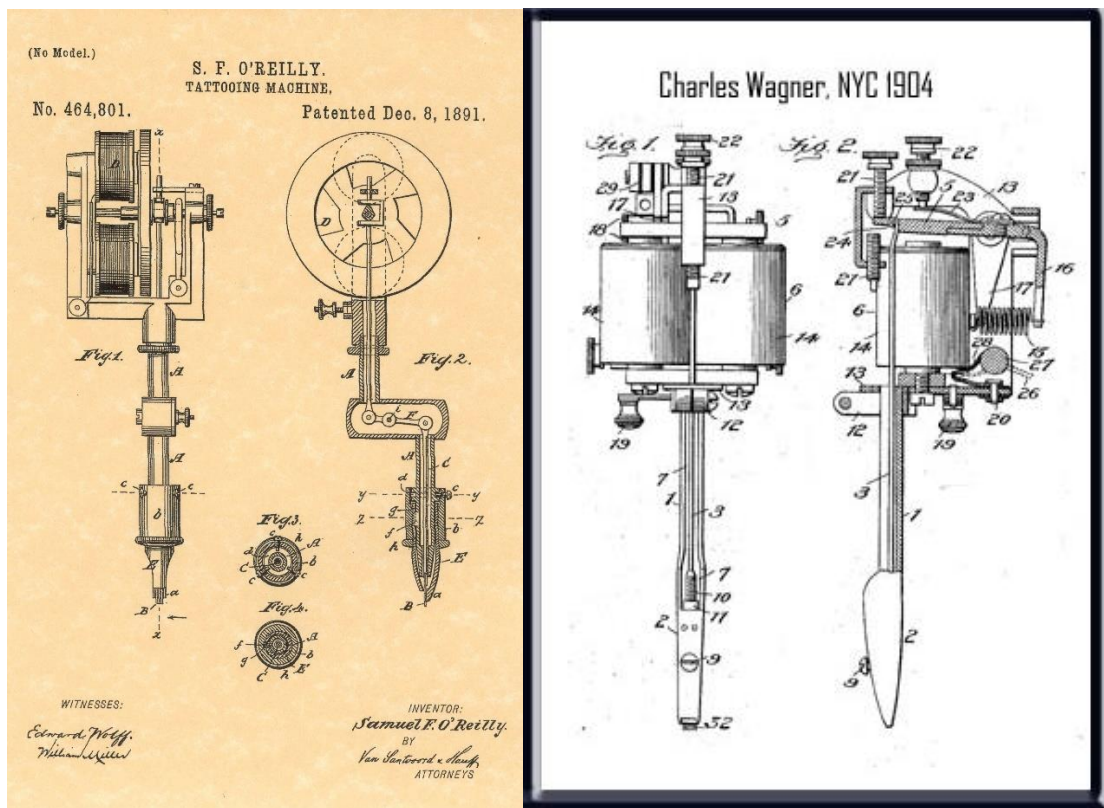


Figure 2.3 of Samuel O'Reilly's Tattoo Machine (from *The Irish Times*) and Figure 2.4 of Charlie Wagner's Tattoo Machine (from *The James Street Parlour*)

By the early 1900s, tattooing became less popular amongst American elites as it was becoming more associated with the working class, and people who frequented run-down and disreputable urban areas (Sanders and Vail 2008, 17-18). Tattooing at this time was also viewed as a deviant practice because heavily tattooed men and women were being displayed as curiosities or “freaks” among circuses and sideshows. P.T. Barnum, who was the co-founder of the famous Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, would feature tattooed dwarfs, wrestlers, and even entire tattooed families as part of his traveling circus. People were especially interested in tattooed women given that displaying larger portions of skin at the time opposed societal expectations for how a woman should look and act. Hence, the scandalous nature of tattooed women who flaunted their ink as exhibits drew crowds towards circuses and sideshows (Jonvandyck 2017, Sanders and Vail 2008). Additionally, during World War I and II, it became popular for soldiers to get tattoos that included patriotic imagery, military insignias, and battle commemorations. There were even some Americans who would get patriotic tattoos to symbolize their support for the country and their troops (DeMello 2000, 51-65). Thus, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1940s, tattoos were mainly found on sailors, military people, circus performers, and social outcasts.

2.1.3: Tattooing in the United States from the 1950s to 2010s

When the 1950s arrived, many middle class Americans began to look down on tattoos, viewing it as a “...decorative cultural product dispensed largely by unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in urban slums” which led to tattoo consumers being perceived as “...drawn from marginal, rootless, and dangerously unconventional

social groups” where tattoos were “...a symbolic poke-in-the-eye directed at those who were law-abiding, hard-working, family oriented, and stable” (Sanders and Vial 2008, 18-19). Given that tattooing in the 50s became about acts of defiance in opposition to societal norms and expectations, a new biker style of tattooing was developing on the streets that utilized almost exclusively black ink and were done in a fine-line, single-needle style. From the 50s to the 60s, this style of tattooing became popular amongst outlaw biker gangs, who were often seen as a subcultural group that should be avoided by the rest of society. At the same time, homemade prison tattooing and Chicano gang tattooing were visible in the public eye, which increased the stigma that became attached to permanent body ink. There was also a divide within the practice of tattooing wherein certain imagery, styles, and social customs became associated with specific subcultural groups (DeMello 2000, 67). For example, tattooing amongst outlaw biker gangs were done almost exclusively in black ink with the fine line, single-needle style that typically was associated with Chicano and prison tattooing. Since many outlaw bikers at that time were ex-convicts and acquired their first tattoos while in prison, it is not surprising that the style became popularized in the outside world. Where biker tattoos differed from Chicano and prison tattoos is in their imagery, which typically featured Harley Davidson motorcycles and emblems as well as club logos, skulls, and marijuana leaves. Chicano tattooing, which began with the pachuco gang culture of the 1940s and 50s in the U.S., utilized similar tattoo methods as biker style ink, but had different imagery. Many Chicano tattoos depicted Christ or the Virgin of Guadeloupe as well as emulated other forms of Chicano art such as mural and low-rider art, and the tattoos were used to

demonstrate loyalty to one's community, their family, and God. Prison tattooing again utilized the same methods as biker and Chicano tattooing, and they too identified someone as being part of a specific group that was outside of mainstream society. One of the most popular prison tattoos was a tear drop on the outside corner of the eye, which typically represented someone's suffering during their imprisonment, although it could sometimes signal that the convict had committed murder (DeMello 2000, 67-70).

During the 1960s, tattooing underwent what some have referred to as a "renaissance" where younger artists with art education backgrounds began to explore tattooing as a form of expression and utilized techniques as well as designs from other cultures in order to create custom pieces (Sanders and Vail 2008, 19). This appealed to the younger hippies of the 60s as well as Civil Rights activists and participants of the Feminist Movement who got tattoos to show their support of these movements. Lastly, this decade also saw the emergence of popular young celebrities getting tattooed, like Janis Joplin, Peter Fonda, and Cher (DeMello 2000, 75).

In the 1970s, tattooists in the United States took an interest in Japanese tattooing. One of these artists was Norman Collins, who was known as Sailor Jerry, and he introduced Japanese tattoo imagery and style to other influential artists such as Don Ed Hardy, which shaped the future of American tattooing (see figure 2.5). There was an interest in the way Japanese artists would use colors and shading in their tattoos, and how they created designs meant to utilize the entire body. Additionally, Japanese tattooing was seen as the opposite or traditional American tattooing, which offered a new collection of imagery and led to new hope that tattooing in the U.S. would not die out (DeMello 2000,

72-76). Tattooing was also making its way into mainstream media, with tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle taking on celebrity clients, making appearances on television shows, and having his shop be featured in Time and Life Magazines as well as local newspapers. This relaxed social climate led to a resurgence in the popularity of tattoos, leading to a large shift in tattoo designs that appealed more to women and to the American middle class.

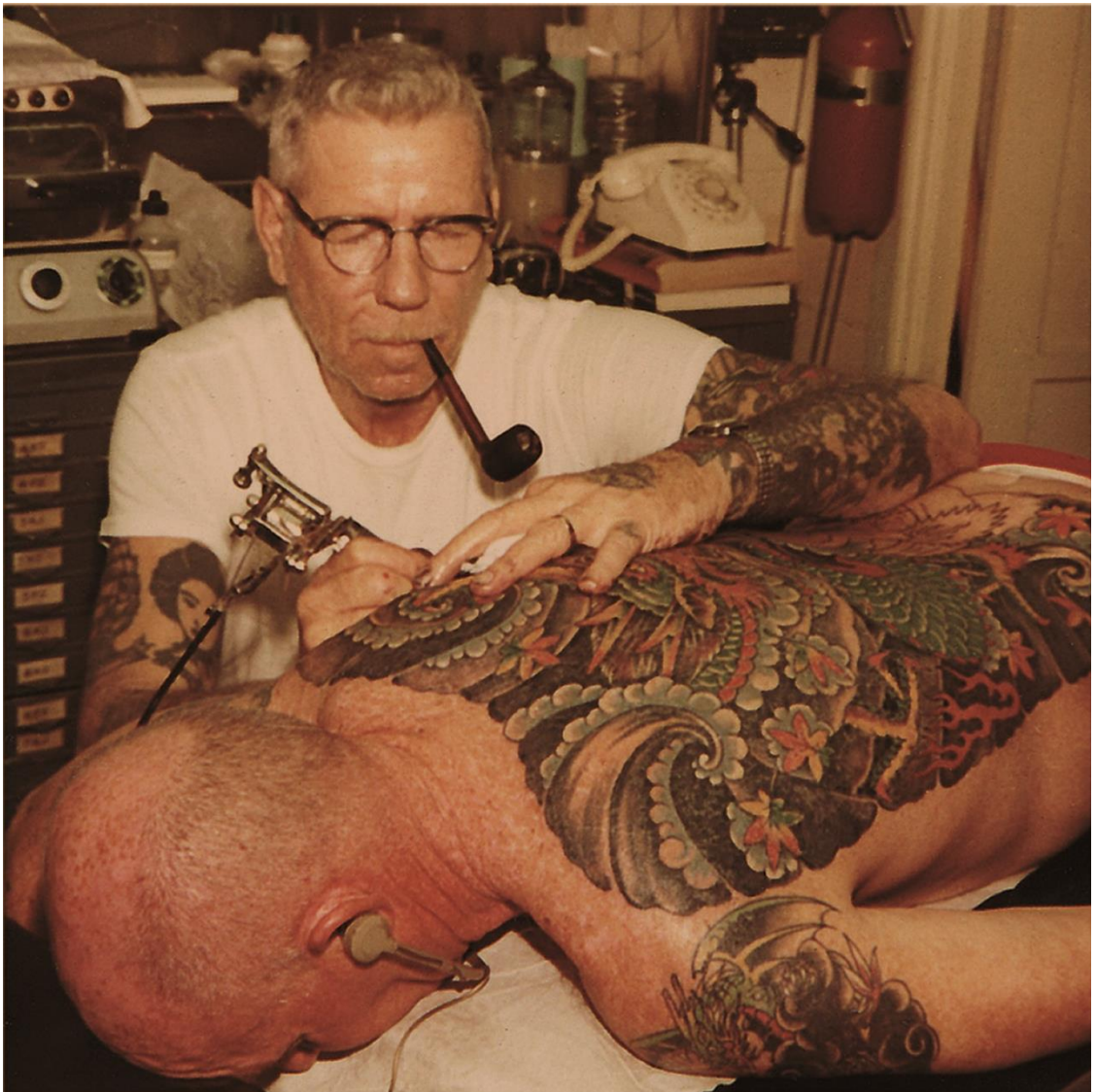


Figure 2.5 of Norman 'Sailor Jerry' Collins (from Australian Bartender)

By the 1980s, Chicano-style tattooing, which was influenced by gang and prison tattooing in the 50s, became a popular trend and was no longer exclusive as a street form of tattooing. Notable artists from East Los Angeles such as Freddy Negrete, Jack Rudy, and Charlie Cartright were the first professional tattooists to utilize this style, bringing it into mainstream prominence with the help of Don Ed Hardy (DeMello 2000, 85). At the same time, tribalism took off as a trend after artists like Leo Zulueta, Cliff Raven, and Dan Thome took an interest in exploring Pacific styles of tattooing from Samoa, Borneo, Hawaii, and New Zealand. Once again, these artists had the support of the legendary artist Don Ed Hardy, and the designs became popular amongst subcultures such as the punk community, sadomasochism (S&M) and leather communities, and middle-class youths (DeMello 2000, 86-87).

When the 1990s arrived, tattoos had fully made their way into the mainstream media, with many celebrities showing off their ink. There was also an increase in the number of women who were looking to get tattooed by this time as designs incorporated more feminine imagery such as hearts and butterflies. In the music industry, tattoos were a regular occurrence, especially within the grunge, hip hop, and the rock and roll scenes (Naama 2022). Tattoos were even making their way into the toy industry, with Mattel Inc. creating the “Butterfly Art Barbie Doll” in 1998, although production was halted a year later after parents voiced concerns about the influences that the tattooed Barbie could have on young children (Francescani 2011). By the start of the twenty-first century, reality TV networks such as TLC introduced programs that focused on tattooing and prominent artists. These shows, including *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink*, and *Inked*, were successful

in increasing the mainstream popularity of tattoos and led to an increased acceptance and appreciation of tattooing. As a result of the increased popularity of tattoos, by 2010, it was estimated that about 23% of adults in the United States had a tattoo (Schaeffer and Dinesh 2023).

While this section on the history of tattooing is lengthy, I felt it was necessary to include it because it establishes tattooing as a global practice that has occurred throughout many cultures for thousands of years. Additionally, this chapter displays not only how the purposes of tattoos have shifted over time, but it also points out how societal perceptions regarding tattooing have changed significantly, especially within Western societies as they became associated with particular economic statuses or subcultural groups whose views do not align with those of higher societal standings. Knowing this history of tattooing and how the practice has been viewed over time is needed for one to have a full understanding of how contemporary tattooing affects the identities, world views, and behaviors of tattooed people.

As mentioned in this section, tattooing is a field that is impacted by advances in technology. When discussing contemporary tattooing, one of the most recent technological advances that has changed the industry is the rise of social media, which will be discussed further in the following chapters. In order to truly understand the influence that these platforms have had on this industry, it is necessary to first establish how these networks came to be, and how they have since grown to reach billions of people around the globe.

2.2: History of Social Media

2.2.1: The Creation and Rise of Social Media Platforms

Although the internet had existed as early as the 1960s in the form of a network for governmental use, it was not until August 6th, 1991, that the World Wide Web (WWW) was made publicly available (Taprial and Kanwar 2012, 13). By 1999, there was a higher level of information sharing and interconnectedness occurring around the world, leading to the use of the term Web 2.0 to describe how the internet had become a network focused on actively engaging with users as well as allowing for users to engage and interact with one another (Kenton 2023). By the 2010s, it became clear that the average American's online and offline lives were becoming more intertwined as various social media platforms gained popularity and created a digital environment where participation is encouraged. As Dr. Jose van Dijck notes in her book *A Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, this is because these platforms enable people

“...to make connections by sharing expressive and communicative content, building professional careers, and enjoying online social lives. In fact, the widespread presence of platforms drives people to move many of their social, cultural, and professional activities to these online environments” (Dijck 2013, 3-4).

She then goes on to mention how these social media networks have influenced human interaction on an individual, community, and larger societal level as the need for connectedness continued to drive people towards these platforms. Many industries also noticed how people were flocking to the internet, and they too took to social networks to grow their influence and popularity through a variety of tactics.

By 2022, the social media app market was valued at being worth \$49.09 billion, a number which is projected to see a major increase over the next few years. (Wong 2023). This is mainly thanks to the increasing global use of 5G technology, which means that social media platforms will need to continue to adapt and evolve in order to keep up with the industry's rate of growth. As of July 2023, there are 5.19 billion internet users in the world, which is 64.6% of the total global population, with 4.88 billion or 59.9% of the internet users also being social media participants (Petrosyan 2023d). The United States is currently listed as the third country with the most internet users behind India and China, with 311.3 million active users, with about 302 million social media users (Petrosyan 2023a). Additionally, it's been estimated that U.S. citizens have an average of 7.1 social media accounts and that they on average spend two hours and seven minutes a day on social media apps, which supports Dijck's claims that these platforms have become in the lives of Americans (Wong 2023).

2.2.2: The Histories and Current Standings of Popular Social Media Sites

As previously mentioned, the definition of social media can include a variety of apps, such as messaging apps, social platforms, and video portals. For my research, I was primarily interested in popular social platforms and video portals, and thus will only be discussing the histories of networks that were utilized within my study. The first of these social digital networks that is important to discuss is Facebook, which was originally founded on February 4th, 2004, by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollom, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes as a social media site that was intended to be used exclusively by Harvard students. Eventually the site became popular with

other Ivy League students, and by 2006, the platform became available to anyone who was over the age of 13 (Jones 2015). By 2008, the network passed MySpace to become the most visited social media website, and in 2012, Facebook was the first social media network to have one billion users on their site (Hall 2023). Now, they have 2.9 billion monthly active users, and of those users, approximately 243.58 million are active participants in the United States. It is also impressive to note that nearly 53% of all social media site visits in the United States are on Facebook, making it the most visited platform in the country as well as the most popular social media network in the world (Dixon 2023b)

With 2.5 billion monthly active users, YouTube is currently the second largest social media network in the world. The platform was originally created in February 2005 by three former PayPal employees named Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim. The original idea was that YouTube would serve as an online space where everyone could share their home videos. In January of 2006, the platform gained 25 million views, and by March, there were more than 20,000 new videos being uploaded to the site every day. The website saw such rapid growth that the original company could no longer maintain it, leading to the purchase of YouTube by Google in November of 2006 for a total of \$1.65 billion (Hosch 2023). By 2009, YouTube was gaining one billion views a day, with more than twenty hours of video being uploaded to the platform every minute, and by March of 2013, they had reached one billion monthly users (Leskin 2020). Today, it is estimated that around 246 million people in the United States view content on YouTube, making it one of the most powerful social media platforms in the country (Ceci 2023)

Another social media network that is utilized by many people around the world is X, an app formerly known as Twitter. Launched back on March 21st in 2006 by former Odeo employees Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Willaims, the site acted as a microblogging platform where users could type up and post messages that were at most 140 characters long. In September of 2011, Twitter had reached 100 million active users, and by December of the following year, the platform surpassed 200 million monthly active users (Meyer 2019). The platform was then purchased in 2022 by Elon Musk, who acquired Twitter for \$44 billion, and in 2023, he renamed the network as X, with the goal of making a super-app that could rival other platforms such as WeChat (Iqbal 2023b). As of 2023, X has a total of 556 million active accounts, placing it as the thirteenth most popular social media network in the world (Dixon 2023b).

Instagram, which is likewise a highly influential social media platform, was created in 2010 by a software engineer named Michel Krieger and a computer programmer named Kevin Systrom. Originally, the app was known as Burbn, and it allowed users to post check-ins and share photos on their accounts. It was later decided that the app should focus on photographs that were taken on mobile devices, and they changed the name of their platform to Instagram. Systrom's and Krieger's app also allowed for users to edit their photographs with filters, and they included a commenting system for their posts as well as "liking" features (Eldridge 2023b). On October 6th, 2010, the first day Instagram was released to the public through Apple's App Store, it reached a total of 25,000 users. Within three months, the app had reached one million active users (Eldridge 2023b). By April of 2012, the network was sold to Facebook for approximately

one billion dollars, and in June of 2018, the platform had amassed one billion monthly active users (Iqbal 2023a). Additionally, in 2022, an estimated \$51.4 billion revenue in 2022, which actually accounted for 45% of Facebook’s total revenue. It is also important to note that much of this revenue growth was seen during the Covid-19 pandemic when many companies turned to social media apps to keep their businesses afloat (Iqbal 2023a). Today, Instagram is tied with WhatsApp for being the third most popular app in the world with 2 billion active users, with 127.2 million of those users living in the United States (Dixon 2023a; Dixon 2023b).

Created by three students at Stanford University, Snapchat is another social media platform that has risen to fame during the past few years. In 2011, Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy, and Reggie Brown came together to launch a social media app that would allow users to post photos and videos that would be temporarily posted to the site before disappearing (O’Connell 2020). The app became popular amongst younger users who did not want others to be able to access their social media history, and by 2015, Snapchat had reached 100 million daily users (Nevada Inventors 2022). With the addition of new features such as streaks, filters, stories, memories, and Snapchat Map, the app has continued to grow, and with a total of 635 million active accounts, Snapchat is currently the world’s 9th most popular social media app (Dixon 2023b).

An additional social media platform that has risen in prominence is Pinterest, a unique social media site that utilizes a bulletin board format where users can “pin” and organize images either to their own personal boards or to community boards that follow different themes. Founded by Ben Silberman and Paul Sciarra, the network was launched

as a closed beta site in March of 2010. After nine months, the site gained 10,000 users, and the official launch of the iPhone app in early March 2011 saw an unexpected number of downloads. The app saw quick success, having gained 11 million total visits per week by December of 2011, making it one of the top ten largest social network services. Pinterest was also the fastest site to gain ten million unique visitor marks, a record that they reached by January of 2012 (Zippia 2021). It is interesting to note that the largest Pinterest audience comes from the United States, with 84.6 million active monthly users on the site in 2023. Currently, Pinterest has 445 million active users, which makes it the 14th most popular social media platform in the world (Dixon 2023bP)

Launched in 2005 as an online social media forum by entrepreneurs Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, Reddit is a social media network that has also become successful during the past couple of decades. The idea behind this site was for users to be able to upvote or downvote content in order to promote content that they think would be useful, interesting, or relevant in the context of a discussion (Eldridge 2023a). By 2006, the site was purchased by a company called Conde Nast for around \$20 million (BusinessIdeasLab 2022). In 2008, it became possible for users to create subreddits, which would allow users to create posts or view content that is about specific topics. Today, there are over 130,000 active subreddits that discuss a variety of specific subjects and interests, and the site has 52 million active daily users as well as approximately 430 million active monthly users (Curry 2023).

2.3: Tattooing Reaches the Internet

Tattoos had an early presence on the internet. In fact, back in 2002 the term “tattoo” became the most searched term on the internet (Zuckerman 2021). Today, there are thousands of accounts across multiple social media sites that post tattoo-related content. This includes accounts that belong to heavily tattooed models, shops, artists, and accounts that exist just to celebrate the tattoo community. For example, when looking at Facebook one can find multiple public and private community groups focusing on tattoos that users can join. Some of these groups focus on sharing information about tattoo artists and shops in specific states, while others are aimed at connecting members who are interested in specific styles or subjects. The app currently has over 18 million posts that have been tagged with “#tattoos”, while “#tattooideas” has 6.3 million posts. With regards to Instagram, #tattoo currently has 190,799,772 posts while #tattooideas has 18,175,410 posts. There are also 34,662,636 posts under #tattooartist and 5,555,139 posts that utilize #tattooshop. Additionally, there are thousands of accounts belonging to artists and shops that users can browse to look for inspiration or to find a shop or artist to go to for their next tattoo project.

Looking at Reddit alone, there are a variety of subreddits that focus on tattooing. For example, on r/tattoo advice, which currently has 125,000 members, redditors can ask other members of the forum if they think that their tattoo design is good, or if their newest art piece looks infected. Some users may ask for ideas of how they can cover tattoos that they do not like while others may inquire as to how they should politely go about rescheduling an appointment or how much they should expect to tip their artist.

There is also the highly popular subreddit r/tattoos. With 7.1 million members, this forum allows for community members to show off pictures of their new ink, and it hosts a weekly discussion thread where people can ask for help with finding artists in their local area or discuss the best designs for certain tattoo placements.

As one can see from the history of tattooing, this form of body modification has been impacted by advances in technology as well as by societal trends. The most recent technological change that has had a great effect on the lives of billions of people around the world has been the rise of social media platforms. As the histories as well as current information provided have shown, social media sites have grown rapidly, and they are utilized by millions and in some cases billions of people every day. With many people becoming active users and participants on these platforms, it has shifted the ways in which members of our society operate and interact with each other. Additionally, several industries have had to adapt and alter the way that they communicate with their customers, including the tattoo industry. Therefore, in order to fully understand what the tattoo culture is like now and how members of tattoo communities continue to communicate and interact with each other, it becomes necessary to study how social media is impacting this practice.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In order to conduct my own research on tattooing and social media, it was vital that I first have an understanding of the previous research that has been done on these topics. Thus, chapter three serves as a summary of the sources that have shaped the direction of this thesis. The first part of this chapter will be used to discuss some of the studies that have been done by notable tattoo researchers such as Michael Atkinson, Margo DeMello, and Clinton Sanders. In addition to describing how their work impacted academic research on tattoos, there is a focus on illustrating how the key aspects of their research have remained relevant when discussing contemporary tattooing. This chapter includes information regarding the few sources that have discussed tattooing and social media together and includes a brief description of how these works were used as inspiration for this study. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the theories and concepts that were utilized to form the theoretical framework, which will be used to aid with the interpretation of the research data and answering the posed research questions. This includes information regarding the formation of the theories and what fields of study they originate from. I mention how anthropologists have used these theories in their work and discuss why these theories are necessary for understanding how information is shared through digital spaces and how tattoos can be interpreted as forms of visual communication which express information about the person that they decorate.

3.1: Relevant Research on Tattooing

As mentioned in the previous chapter, tattooing is an artform that has been practiced for thousands of years in many different cultures. Hence, there is an extensive amount of anthropological research that has been done regarding tattooing that focuses on a variety of factors. A large amount of this research seems to focus on the study of tattoo practices in other cultures, and some contemporary research still focuses on elements that contribute to the idea of “otherness.” In a tattoo literature review by Enid Schildkraut, an entire section was devoted to the Western fascination with tattooing in different cultures, and how tattooing and scarification eventually became associated with race and ideas of exoticism. Much of early tattoo research from the late 1900s to the early 1990s seemed to focus on the idea of the body as a boundary phenomenon. This was explored by notable anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, who in 1963 studied Māori tattoos, and he viewed bodies in these practices as being “...a surface waiting for the imprintation of culture” (Schildkraut 2004). Levi-Strauss concluded that in Māori tattooing, its purpose was “...not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group” (Levi-Strauss 1963). Others such as Terry Turner, who conducted his studies on an Indigenous group in Brazil called the Kayapo in the 1980s, were focused on the significance of body decoration as well as the ways that body art can create individual identities while determining boundaries between groups (Schildkraut 2004).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars shifted their attention to the negative aspects associated with tattooing, such as deviancy, rebellion, and stigma. This was

explored in Michael Atkinson's book *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*, which was published in 2003 with the goal of examining how tattoo culture has shifted in Canada. Atkinson's research on tattoos is well-known, and in this particular book, he took a sociological approach to discuss the social stigma that is attached to this form of body art and explored "...how the act of tattooing is as much a response to the stigma as it is a form of personal expression" (Atkinson 2003). He aimed to display how tattoos function as communicative acts that are deeply social, personal, and meaningful, and he wanted to learn why Canadians would choose to engage with a form of body modification that could potentially place them on the "outs" of society given that tattooed people had been identified as a group of undesirable individuals. Through interviews, Atkinson discovered that there was a focus on "tattooing's relationship with social 'difference,'" meaning that many of the interviewees were describing themselves as some kind of outsider, and their tattoos had become symbols of their self-perceived sense of difference (Atkinson 2003, 163-164). In these situations, tattooing in Western culture could be viewed as an action that allowed other cultural or social outsiders to identify with each other, which could indicate membership within subcultural groups or communities and in turn establish a sense of belonging and solidify group identity. Finally, he discussed how there are some tattoo enthusiasts who may choose to hide their tattoos because they fear the way that others would react to them and do not want to be identified as someone who actively defies cultural norms. Sometimes, this fear could stem specifically from concerns regarding how family members and loved ones would react to a tattooed person's ink, which could prevent an enthusiast from modifying their body in a way that they feel is

true to them. Overall, Atkinson addressed a variety of topics within his book, making it a valuable source for anyone who is interested in learning about how the practice of tattooing can impact one's sense of identity in a multitude of contexts.

Cultural anthropologist Margo DeMello is another well-known tattoo researcher, and in 2000, she published her book *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. In addition to providing historical information regarding the history of tattooing within Western societies, DeMello's book examined how a tattoo community has been formed which centers around the celebration of tattooing. She noted that although the term "tattoo community" could refer to all tattooed people, her research focused on people who actively embrace the idea of community and seek out community-oriented activities, and that while the tattoo community is open to all tattooed people, "...it is also hierarchical: stratified by class and status, it is now largely defined by elite tattooists and tattoo magazine publishers who are primarily from the middle class" (DeMello 2000, 3). DeMello did address the fact that the use of the term community is contested given that it does not wholly capture the variation and conflict that exists within tattoo culture. She explained that although there are multiple subcommunities that can exist within the tattoo community, these groups often overlap, and that to separate out these specific subgroups would impose artificial boundaries. DeMello went on to state that the tattoo community does exist because it is experienced by tattooed people across the United States, and that her goal was "...to discover how the tattoo community, as a unified community, came into being, how its meaning has changed over time, and why the idea of the community has commanded the legitimacy that it has" (DeMello 2000, 4).

When it comes to this concept of community, DeMello explained that her own ideas about what it means to be part of the tattoo community changed as she conducted her research, and that the tattoo community was not just limited to existing within the walls of tattoo shops and instead "...occurs whenever tattooed people talk about themselves, about each other, and to each other" (DeMello 2000,18). With this new understanding, DeMello found that the tattoo community exists within magazines, newspapers, Internet newsgroups, and at tattoo-oriented events such as conventions. She went on to describe how being a part of the tattoo community includes "...a commitment to learning about tattoos, to meeting other people with tattoos, and to living a lifestyle in which tattoos play an important role" (DeMello 2000, 21). Lastly, in chapter four of her book, "Discourse and Differentiation: Media Representation and Tattoo Organizations," DeMello argued that the class basis and connotations of tattooing, both as an art form and as a social practice, has been altered through media discourse, and that the influence of media on tattooing has become a controlling factor that amplifies certain voices of the tattoo community while smothering the voices of others (DeMello 2000, 97-98). DeMello's perception of the tattoo community along with her argument that it has been changed by the media were influential when it came to my own research regarding the impacts that social media have had on tattoo culture. Her insights were especially useful when considering how the tattoo community can be found on social media platforms. Her research also inspired me to visit a tattoo convention and to speak with a few of the artists there in order to understand for myself how these events act as displays of contemporary

tattoo culture and how participation with these expos can be used to define membership within the tattoo community.

Clinton Sanders is another notable tattoo researcher, and in 1989 he published *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. His book focused on the association of deviancy with body modification, the place of tattoos within the art world, and how there can be misunderstandings when artists are confronted by the expectations of clients who are getting their first tattoos (Sanders and Vail 2007). After providing a cross-cultural examination of the history of tattooing, Sanders explained in Chapter 4, “The Tattoo Relationship: Risk and Social Control in the Studio” that tattooing “...entails a close personal involvement between the client and service worker” and that the “...relative permanence of the service outcome means that appreciation or dissatisfaction continue long after the service interaction is terminated” (Sanders and Vail 2007, 108). He noted how there are few situations in life where there are long periods of physical contact as well as the willful infliction of pain on another person, which in some cases can be a stranger if someone is getting their first tattoo or are going to a new artist. Sanders also mentioned how when tattooing a client for the first time, the artist may be confronted by unrealistic expectations, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. I found this chapter to be significant when it came to analyzing the interviews I conducted with the tattoo artists, especially when many of them expressed how important it is for clients to feel comfortable with their artists given that tattooing is an intimate act. Hence, Sanders’ discussion of how tattoo artists work to control their environment provided

valuable information that shaped my understanding of how social media can have both a positive and negative impact on the communication between artists and their clients.

An important example of research that focuses on modern tattooing comes from sociologist Michael Rees. His book, *Tattooing in Contemporary Society: Identity and Authenticity*, discussed how tattooing has become an increasingly popular practice in Great Britain as well as other Western societies and proposes that there are four inter-related developments that have resulted in the redefinition of tattooing and tattooed individuals. These developments include "...the increasing importance of the body as a site for constructing identity, the increased visibility of the practice in popular culture, process of cultural diversity and globalization, and attempts to legitimize the practice as an acceptable art form" (Rees 2021, 95-96). When exploring these four developments, Rees explained that the consumer culture of the West has often focused on the body becoming increasingly vital to an individual's sense of self-identity. This has often been seen in the form of diet or fitness trends, as well as in cosmetic surgery procedures. When people are encouraged to construct their identities through their bodies, they will eventually encounter "nonmainstream body modification" because of mainstream media access (Rees 2021, 98-99). With regards to the increased visibility of tattooing within mainstream media, Rees referred to the importance of celebrity society, explaining how celebrities have the power to shape cultural norms with regards to appearance and displays in the body. As the visibility of tattooing increased within consumer and cultural celebrities, there was an increase in mainstream media that focused specifically on the practice of tattooing, which included magazines and TV programs. This was significant

because these media sources led to tattoos becoming seen as culturally meaningful, normative, and artistic. I found Rees' approach to understanding the increased popularity of tattoos within the Western world to be useful and informative. In particular, I was interested in his consideration of how the body becomes a site for constructing identity, and wondered how tattoos can be used as a way for people to express different aspects of their identity or to cultivate a particular image that they want others to see. I also found his idea regarding tattoo acceptability growing because of an increase in the visibility of tattoos within popular culture to be fascinating, and it led me to pondering about how the visibility of tattoos through social media may have furthered the acceptance of tattoos by mainstream society.

When it comes to literature about the internet, it was not until the 1990s that researchers really became interested in these digital spaces. Some of the earliest case studies included themes that are still central to social media today, such as identity construction, embodiment, and creation of communities through narrative, speech, and social action. Only recently have scholars considered the intersection between social media and contemporary tattooing, let alone studying tattoos within a contemporary context. One of the few researchers to consider this is Dr. William Ryan Force. Coming from a sociology background, his work often focuses on the intersection between language and power in a variety of contexts, which includes the occupational world of tattoo artists. Published in 2020, "Tattooing in the Age of Instagram" became a highly valuable source when it came to planning my thesis because it is one of the only pieces of academic writing that discusses the impacts of social media on tattoo culture. With his

research, Force focused on the perspective of tattoo artists and how they have been affected specifically by Instagram, and he argued

“...the use of social media like IG has transformed the techniques, tools, and occupational practices associated with tattooing. Additionally, IG has itself become the ‘site’ for a distinct tattoo scene marked by distinct styles of tattooing and tattoo collecting. The ways in which IG-based tattoo artists work and the styles they work in reveal the fluid and complex interplay of tattooing’s subcultural origins and its contemporary popularity in the emergence of a distinct scene with its own particular consequences for the tattoo artist as a kind of worker” (Force 2020 1-2).

Force’s thoughts regarding how Instagram specifically has led to a new tattoo scene that favors certain styles prompts one to consider the ways in which tattoo content-consumers could be influenced in their decision-making practices as a result of what they are seeing across platforms such as Instagram. One example of this is the “here-and-there badge motif” tattoos, also known as the “hodgepodge” tattoo collection style. This style favors smaller tattoos and was once considered a dying trend in the industry when larger custom pieces became seen as the sign of serious tattoo collectors. In 2010 however, the trend began to reappear as people sought out smaller, more affordable tattoos that they could get from artists that they admired in a single sitting. Force noted that smaller tattoos used to be considered as a problematic trend for tattooers with a limited client base, but that the popularity of this trend on Instagram has allowed many elite artists to work on smaller tattoos at a higher volume (Force 2020). Thus, his work led to a consideration the ways in which social media platforms are impacting the tattoo community, and how people may be utilizing these digital worlds in order to find connections with others who are tattoo enthusiasts or share common interest in certain styles or subject matter.

An important aspect of tattooing that Force addressed in his research article is that although social media platforms such as IG have increased visibility of the tattoo community and more people than ever are inked, “It is a mistake, however, to assume that tattooing is now a fully normalized and sanctioned cultural form” (Force 2020, 2). In a section titled “Tattooing as Dirty Work,” Force explained how tattooing as a practice can still be seen as a case of “dirty work” given that it challenges people’s sense of moral propriety to an extent. Here, Force drew upon the work of notable sociologist Erving Goffman who studied stigma and wrote that it is “...ultimately a matter of our social audience’s perception and is situationally-bound,” and described how Goffman alongside another sociologist named Howie Becker both noted that stigmatized careers can impact social interactions as well as cause tension in family relationships and limit the institutional spheres that people can operate within (Force 2020, 3). Other researchers noted how tattoo artists seem to be aware of this issue, and that they attempt to distance themselves from the unsavory parts of tattooing’s history. This is particularly important because as previously mentioned, Force’s research participants were tattoo artists, and although there are many artists who are friendly and willing to talk to researchers, it is known that “Tattoo artists are notoriously secretive about their craft...and are unimpressed with the social status of outsiders to their world” (Force 2020, 4). I found this awareness and insight into the perspective of tattoo artists to be highly valuable, and Force’s work had an impact on how I went about finding participants for my interviews. His approach to conducting fieldwork also helped shape some of the questions that I specifically posed to the tattoo artists about their occupation, as well as how they felt that

their industry and the tattoo community has been altered by social media. In the summary portion of his article, Force called for more studies on Instagram as an online social world, saying that “Whatever the analytic or methodological approach, future research on tattoo culture-as well as other cultures, subcultures, communities and scenes- would benefit by attending to the myriad ways in which social media extend and interact with our experiences IRL” (Force 2020, 15). When first reading this, I found Force’s statement to be affirming for my own plans of exploring how social media has come to influence the world of tattooing.

Another influential author whose work guided the direction of my research is Lee Barron, who wrote *Tattoo Culture: Theory and Contemporary Contexts*. Barron is one of the few tattoo researchers whose work considers the impact of social media on the tattoo industry. Although this was not the main focus of his research, Barron did address how tattooing in contemporary society has risen in popularity due to the fact that the social media and mainstream media frequently display tattooed people such as celebrities and models, which increases societal acceptance of tattooing. Additionally, when discussing the results of his interviews, Barron noted that social media can have an impact on the decision-making practices of clients in that they utilize platforms like Instagram to research tattoo artists in order to examine the quality of their work or determine if the artist’s style aligns with the style that they are hoping to have their tattoo done in (Barron 2017). The importance of social media was also addressed in a section called “The Tattooist’ Craft: From Conventions to Conventions.” Here, Barron considered the importance of social media from the perspective of the tattooist and drew upon Martin

Heidegger's analysis of the origin of art as well as Howard Becker's approach to the visibility of art works. He explained that technology is essential for the production of art in that it allows artists to create their pieces as well as allows for their work to be seen by the public. Thus, social media is a valuable tool for the tattoo industry because they "... have enabled artists to transcend the limitations of traditional wall-mounted Flash collections, printed portfolios, and word-of-mouth to communicate their work regionally, nationally and internationally" (Barron 2017, 128). As previously mentioned, there are few tattoo researchers who have discussed the impacts of social media on the tattoo industry. Given that Barron is one of these researchers, his mentions of how social media can be utilized by both clients and tattoo artists were highly impactful in my own research and shaped the questions that I asked in surveys as well as impacted the conversations that I had with tattoo artists regarding how they utilize social media platforms.

3.2: Theoretical Framework

This thesis utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to create a theoretical framework in order to study the intersection of tattooing and social media. The theories that were used to form this framework include semiotics, identity theory, social identity theory, and the concepts of deviancy and stigma. The identity theories and semiotics were critical in understanding how tattoos can visually communicate aspects of someone's identity to others. The concepts of deviancy and stigma were necessary to include given that tattooing as a practice has long been viewed with negative perceptions. Although tattoos have now become more accepted by mainstream society, tattooed people are aware that

this may not be the case everywhere, which may affect how they interpret different situations. Additionally, for those who practiced tattooing or were becoming tattooed during these times where tattoos were associated with criminality and rebelliousness, their experiences may impact how they view the current tattoo industry and community. Lastly, this thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach for the theoretical framework because some of these theories and concepts emerged from fields of study that are outside of anthropology. To use this theoretical framework effectively, it is vital that there be a full understanding of what these theories mean, which includes knowing how they are used within their fields and how they are utilized by anthropologists.

Semiotics, also known as a theory of signs, was created by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who wanted to create a systematic understanding of how language works. He argued that the sign is the basic unit of language, and that a sign consists of two parts. The first of these parts is the signifier, which is the carrier of meaning and the form of the sign, which could be a sound or word. The second part, the signified, is the actual meaning of the sign and the concept that is being represented (Martin 2018, 30). Another notable figure who has contributed to semiology is the American philosopher and mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce, who suggested that anything can be a sign, as long as someone is interpreting it as standing for something that beyond just itself. Tattoos can function as visible, permanent signs on the body. For this reason, they can be studied as signs to understand the reasonings and meanings behind peoples' tattoos (Rose 2016). Lee Barron, one of the few authors who has written about contemporary tattooing and social media has also utilized semiology in his work.

He described contemporary tattooing as being "...a new 'era' of the Semiotic/Existential tattoo culture given the degree to which tattoos frequently tell stories and signify key moments and developments in a life whereby many individuals map out rites of passage on their body" (Barron 2017). Barron used semiotics as a lens for viewing contemporary tattooing by looking at the way that people take control of change by inking permanent designs into their body that freeze or capture their identities at a certain point in time. Additionally, in a chapter called "Tattoos as Communicative Practice and Phenomenological Expression," Barron explored how tattoos function as semiotic signs that communicate as well as being a phenomenological practice. Together, this theoretical framework meant that

"...tattoos can arguably act as transformative aspects of being, as a means of communicating to the self and the external world a sense of personal identity through images or text that convey temporality, which can map out differing aspects of the self which are carried by the body through time as the wearer ages," meaning that "tattoos operate as a semiotic device that render entire bodies as readable texts...to the extent that 'it is possible to read the tattoo as a picture that tells stories'...even if the precise meanings are abstract to the viewer" (Barron 2017, 60).

For my research, I utilize a similar approach when it comes to the following: First, the meanings that tattoos hold; 2), how they represent aspects of one's identity and personality; and 3), how that can change throughout time as people gain more experiences as well as greater amounts of permanent artwork. This use of semiotics to study visual signs also allows for an exploration of how signs can be used to create a feeling of community and group identity, even if the tattoos do not have specific universal meanings that other members of the tattoo community would understand.

Identity is another significant concept that has informed my research. In “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” sociologists Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke explained that

“...the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance...these expectations and meanings form a set of standards that guide behavior” (Stets and Burke 2000).

They also noted that within identity theory, “...the naming...includes all the things (including self and other) that take on meaning in relation to our plans and activities” (Stets and Burke 2000). From a psychological and sociological perspective, identity is one’s sense of self which is established through unique characteristics as well as through aspirations, affiliations, social roles, and actions.

Anthropology defines identity in a similar way, although there is a greater emphasis placed on cultural settings as the main factor which shapes who a person is. This was explored further by anthropologist Zagorka Golubovic in her article “An Anthropological Conceptualisation of Identity.” She mentioned at the beginning of her paper that the concept of identity can be difficult to explain because of the complexity of its meaning, and because it is often discussed within a non-contextual background. For Golubovic the basic meaning of identity “...refers to where one (a person or a group) belongs, and what is expressed as ‘self-image’ or/and ‘common image,’ what integrate them inside self or a group existence, and what differentiate them vis-à-vis ‘others’” (Golubovic 2011, 25). Golubovic stated that the anthropological approach to identity is different in that it views identity as being

“...a socio-culturally conditioned phenomenon...That is to say, identity concept does not belong to a natural/biological category, but it is socio-culturally impregnated expression of both individual/personal and collective way of existence and recognition. This means that it is always a matter of choice, unlike its interpretation as naturally given and biologically inherited ways of understanding and explaining oneself and collective existence” (Golubovic 2011, 28).

As this quote displays, one’s identity is shaped by the experiences that they have throughout life rather than being genetically determined or inherited. She went on to state that even though individual identities may be culturally conditioned, there are different elements and methods that contribute to their formation. Personal identity can only be formed from free determination, meaning that individual identities are developed when a person’s free choice has a decisive role during the process of individuation. The anthropological view of identity is important because tattoos are not something that a person is born with. Instead, they are sought out by individuals to either represent a part of themselves or because they want to use this form of body modification to cultivate a specific image. In this way, tattoos are used to help someone display their identity as an individual while also identifying them as being part of the tattoo community or a specific group, depending on the iconography and meaning of the tattoo.

Within the concept of identity, it is also important to consider social identity. Social identity, as a concept, shaped my understanding of how social media has impacted the current tattoo community. Formulated in the 1970s by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, this theory focuses on the interplay between personal and social identities, and it aims to specify the circumstances and situations in which people think of themselves as individuals or as group members. Thus, social identity was developed in

order to explain how individuals are creating and defining their place in society (Ellemers 2023). In chapter two of his book “Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian’s Context and Identities,” Dr. David E. Wilhite focused on the concept of social identity and how it has been defined and utilized by social anthropologists. He mentioned that early studies conducted by anthropologists tended to focus on aspects of a society that can have an impact on individual or group identity, and that in a broader academic sense, identity was understood in terms of “sameness,” “fixed-ness,” or “bound-ness.” With his work, Wilhite focused specifically on how colonization made it necessary for anthropology to define and reflect upon issues of “personhood,” “citizenship,” and “nationality,” which led to a discussion of how postcolonial identity can lead to a sense of hybridity or an “in-between-ness.” Wilhite went on to discuss how the emphasis on the discursive nature of identity being fixed or bound is a western conceptualization, which forced anthropologists to “...recognize that ‘cultural realities are always produced in specific sociohistorical contexts and that it is necessary to account for the processes that generate those contexts in order to account for the...practice of identity” (Wilhite 2007, 37-38). He also noted that most anthropologists have come to recognize how groups and individuals hold multiple identities, and that the prominence of those identities being expressed depends on context. Thus, “the way in which an individual’s or group’s various identities ‘intertwine,’ ‘collide,’ or ‘collude’ depends upon context, and when individuals invoke a specific identity, it is to be read as a part of an array of factors which affect that individual’s self-understanding” (Wilhite 2007, 38).

As noted above, I see the theories of identity and social identity as being useful for exploring the ways that people become influenced by digital spaces. According to social media marketing expert Tracy Tuten, “We all have an image of ourselves, or a sense of who we are; this is called our self-concept. From a psychological perspective, social identity is part of our self-concept that results from our perceived membership in a group” (Tuten 2021). Tuten went on to explain that when someone participates in social media, they are engaging with one or more groups, and

“Our online activities and the information we post document and express our social identity-the way we represent ourselves via our social connections, community membership, participation, and shared texts, images sounds, and videos-to others who access the web. Consequently, social identity can influence where, when, how, and what you contribute as a social media participant” (Tuten 2021).

Based on these explanations regarding identity, social identity, and the effects of social media participation, I think that these are useful theories to use when questioning how our online lives can influence our offline decisions, which can include decisions about permanent body modification.

These two theories are important to consider when thinking about why people choose to become tattooed in the first place, and what factors could have had an effect on shaping their identity as a tattooed person. For example, some people may use tattoos to express unique aspects of their life or certain parts of their identity and therefore view their tattooed bodies as being a sign of their individualization from the rest of society. Others, however, may see their ink as a visible indicator of their membership within a certain group or community (DeMello 2000, 137-138). This can be especially true for

those who sought out their tattoos at a time when the practice was not widely accepted, and ink was interpreted as being the signs of social outcasts. Given that tattoos can be representative of both individual and collective identities, it is vital that these two theories are utilized when reflecting on the ways in which people are viewing their own tattoos and what they are expressing through their ink.

Two other concepts that are necessary to remember when discussing the art of tattooing within Western cultures are deviancy and stigma. As mentioned in the background portion of this thesis, tattooing has long been associated with the concept of deviance. Typically associated with the fields of criminology, sociology, and psychology, deviance is "... what people consider immoral, criminal, strange, and disgusting" and it includes "not just criminal acts, but also any actions, thoughts, feelings, or social statuses that members of a social group judges to be a violation of their values or rules" (Anderson 2017, 4). In his book, "Deviance: Social Constructions and Blurred Boundaries," sociologist Leon Anderson noted that one of the key features of deviance is the fact that it has blurred boundaries and there are not always clear answers of whether someone's actions are bad or wrong. As Paul Rock explained in his book "Deviant Behavior," this lack of clarity can make deviance a difficult and complex situation to grasp, especially when the behavior may not be defined by an institution as being illegal and the law cannot be utilized as a tool of social control. When discussing the topic of deviance, Rock was careful to mention how

"People may conceive of themselves as immoral or wayward although no discernible rule-making or rule-enforcement may have occurred. Indeed, their

self-definition may be built around the responses of a generalized other which is foreign to their society, imaginary, or anachronistic” (Rock 2013, 24).

This perception of deviant behavior is particularly important to consider when discussing the concept of deviance and tattooing because although tattoos are much more common in the twenty-first century, there are still some who consider tattoos to be a sign of deviancy, which is an opinion that many tattooed people are still aware of, especially those who are heavily tattooed or have ink in places that are highly visible such as the hands, neck, or face.

According to psychologists Brenda Major and Laurie O’Brien, the contemporary understanding of stigma comes from Erving Goffman, who in 1963 published an influential book called *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled identity*. In this book, Goffman described stigma as being “...an attribute that extensively discredits an individual, reducing him or her ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Major and O’Brien 2005, 394). Major and O’Brien also explained that stigmatization occurs when people possess an attribute that is devalued within a social context, and that these attributes can include both visible and invisible marks, and that they can be controllable or uncontrollable as well as be linked specifically to appearance. As a result of stigmatization, other members of a culture may actively exclude and avoid those who they deem to be different as well as create harmful stereotypes and evaluations. They continued to say that there are four mechanisms through which stigma can affect people, one of which is negative treatment and discrimination. With this specific mechanism, the authors explained that “Members of stigmatized groups are discriminated against in the housing market, workplace, educational settings, health care,

and the criminal justice system...they are even discriminated against in the family” (Major and O’Brien 2005, 396). Additionally, they noted that members of stigmatized groups can develop shared understandings of the dominant view that their status holds within their society as the result of their own prior experiences as well as exposure to the dominant culture. This however can lead to times when perceptions of a situation are not always accurate in that some people who are targets of objective discrimination may fail to recognize their situation while others may believe that they are victims of discrimination even if they are not. As Major and O’Brien stated, these perceptions of prejudice are dependent on

“...a variety of personal, situational, and structural factors...for example, individuals are more likely to perceive discrimination (a) against their group as a whole than against themselves personally...(b) when information is presented aggregated across members of a group than on a case-by-case basis...and (c) when prejudice cues are clear rather than ambiguous” (Major and O’Brien 2005, 400).

As previously mentioned, there are some who may think that tattoos are no longer stigmatized or thought of as acts of deviant behavior due to how prevalent the practice appears to be now in the United States. However, this is not always the case, particularly when it comes to employment where recent research on body art and deviancy revealed that there is still an anti-tattoo bias in the workplace (Twes and Stafford 2019). This is especially true when one considers how engaging in what can be seen as a deviant act or behavior can easily lead to the idea that someone may be engaging in other behaviors that are seen as morally, ethically, or legally wrong (Adams 2009). Awareness of this perception has also affected the decision-making process for tattooed people who may

seek to one day have a career where tattoos are frowned upon and thus choose specific placements where they can hide their artwork as a way to prevent others from forming an unfavorable opinion of them (Adams 2023). Thus, these are important concepts to consider, especially when conversing with tattoo artists and people who have multiple tattoos given that their experiences and behavior as a tattooed person may be shaped either by their direct experiences with stigma and associated deviancy, or their perceptions of how non-tattooed people may view them as social outcasts.

Chapter 4: Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis is a two-part investigation that aims to understand how social media has impacted the tattoo industry. I also wanted to conduct research that would examine how tattoos can be used as a way for someone to express various parts of their identity, and how their ink may hold significance for them as a result. At the same time, I was interested in researching how the importance of meanings behind a tattoo may change when someone adds more ink to their collection, given that this appeared to be another gap in tattoo-related research that had yet to be explored. Thus, my thesis utilized two main research questions as well as a couple of secondary questions:

1. How has social media changed the practice of tattooing?
 - a. How is social media being utilized when people seek out tattoo-related content?
2. How are tattoos used to express or explore the differing facets of a person's identity?
 - a. How does the meaning and significance of one's tattoos change as they add more ink to their body?

Given that the study focused on two main research questions, it became necessary to utilize a mixed methods approach and gather both qualitative and quantitative data. The theoretical framework of this thesis played a vital role in shaping the data collection and subsequently the data analysis methods. For example, the concepts expressed in identity theory and social identity theory guided the creation of the first main research question which focuses on how social media has led to shifts within the tattoo industry and how there have been changes within the tattoo community. These theories then led to a sub question which asks about how social media is used by people who are viewing tattoo-related content. To answer these questions, it became necessary to conduct an online survey to collect a significant number of participants for both populations in question. The nature of these survey questions was then shaped to consider how information and content are shared through the use of digital spaces. The questions also sought to establish how tattoos and social media alike may impact one's sense of identity and self-expression.

Semiotics, identity theory, and social identity theory were crucial when forming the second main research question and its sub question. They focus on examining how the meanings and significance of tattoos can change, and exploring how tattoos can become a reflection of one's identity as well as influence the ways in which others may perceive them. Participant observation was used in addition to semi-structured surveys to gain a better understanding of what the tattoo community is and where it currently exists, which was necessary to establish for considering the ways in which social media may have had an impact on the community and the tattoo industry as a whole.

4.1: Online Survey

To answer the first research question regarding the impacts of social media on the practice of tattooing, I conducted a survey. This survey was created through Qualtrics. The survey was designed to take between ten and fifteen minutes for participants to complete, and participants were allowed to exit the survey at any time or skip any questions that they were not comfortable answering. The first question of the survey also included an implied consent form which explained the purpose of the survey as well as clarified that the survey was looking for participants who use social media and who either already have at least one tattoo or who have no tattoos but are planning to get one in the future. The consent form also included my contact information and the contact information for my advisor. The participants were required to choose an answer stating that they either read and agreed with the consent form or that they did not agree with the consent form. If the latter response was chosen, the survey was immediately closed, and if the participants selected yes, then they continued the survey.

The goal of the first few survey questions was to gather demographic information about the respondents and to gauge their level of social media participation. The first two questions after the consent form asked about the participant's gender identity and age. They were then asked if they currently had any tattoos, with the "no" response including a note stating that if they do not have any and were considering getting their first one, then the following question would pertain to their thought process about getting a tattoo. The following tables displays some of the preliminary demographic information that was collected from the survey respondents:

Table 4.1: Ages and Gender Identities of Respondents with Tattoos

Ages and Gender Identities of Respondents with Tattoos	Man	Woman	Non-Binary	Other	Prefer Not to Say	Total
18-24 years old	12	34	7	2	0	55
25-34 years old	16	50	6	2	0	74
35-44 years old	7	13	1	0	0	21
45-54 years old	2	7	1	0	0	10
55-64 years old	1	2	0	0	0	3
Above 64 years old	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	38	107	15	4	0	164

Table 4.2: Ages and Gender Identities of Respondents Without Tattoos

Ages and Gender Identities of Respondents Without Tattoos	Man	Woman	Non-Binary	Other	Prefer Not to Say	Total
18-24 years old	6	25	5	0	1	37
25-34 years old	3	7	0	0	0	10
35-44 years old	1	0	0	0	0	1
45-54 years old	0	1	0	0	0	1
55-64 years old	0	1	0	0	0	1
Above 64 years old	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	34	5	0	1	50

Questions in the beginning portion of survey also focused on identifying which social media platforms were being utilized by the participants and their reasons for using

these platforms, such as for entertainment or work purposes. The survey participants were then asked what social media platforms they have used to view tattoo-related content and what they were looking for in tattoo-related content, such as design inspiration or artist profiles. Many of these questions included an option for people to choose “other,” in which case they could leave a written response to elaborate on their answers to these questions if they felt it was necessary.

To learn more about the influence of social media on participants’ offline lives, they were asked how important social media was to their sense of identity and within their daily lives. The survey questioned if the respondents were involved in any communities or groups through their social media, and if they answered yes, were requested to elaborate further. They were asked how important tattoos are to their sense of identity and expression. Lastly, the participants were questioned about what influenced their decisions to get tattoos, which included a variety of options such as social media, pop culture, and cultural identity or background. Overall, the questions in this survey were intended to establish how social media has impacted the tattoo industry as well as to see how these online platforms were being utilized when people sought out tattoo-related content.

This survey was shared to popular platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formally Twitter) and Reddit through my personal social media accounts on August 10th, 2022, following the approval of my thesis proposal. The link to the survey was posted to my account bio so that anyone who looked at my social media account would see the link. I decided to share the survey through my personal social media accounts because

many of my friends and family members were aware of my status as a graduate student and that I would be looking for survey participants. A few of them were kind enough to share my survey on their accounts, which expanded the reach of my survey and led to an amazing amount of responses from a wide variety of people. With Reddit, I did have to create a new account, which I called PanicsinVirgo, due to the fact that I had been a frequent lurker on the site but never had an official account. The survey was then shared under two forums. The first of these was r/SampleSize, which is a community where surveys and polls can be posted for research studies or opinion polls. The second place that the surveys were shared on Reddit was r/SurveyExchange where people can post their surveys for others to fill out and then answer one of their surveys in exchange. Both surveys were posted with the title “Survey about Tattoos and Social Media (+18)” and they were only reposted once to both subreddits. After performing data cleansing, the quantitative results of the survey, which included descriptive statistics alongside ordinal variables, were then analyzed through the use of Qualtrics’ data filtration system (Bernard and Ryan 2018).

4.2: Semi-Structured Interviews

For my second research question, I used semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to take between one to two hours to complete, although the lengths of these conversations typically depended on the interviewee and how much information they wanted to share. For the interview participants, I sought to have a mixture of both heavily tattooed people, meaning that they were visibility tattooed people with multiple pieces of permanent artwork, as well as heavily tattooed people who were

tattoo artists. This was done after reading studies from tattoo researchers such as Force and DeMello who also interviewed tattooists, and I thought that the artists may provide unique perspectives regarding my interview questions. In addition to having many tattoos themselves, the artists often create pieces of art for their clients that have special meanings behind them or are trying to capture certain emotions or aspects of their clients' personalities. To find interviewees that were heavily tattooed non-artists, I utilized my personal network and connections to contact potential participants. To find tattoo artists that would be willing to participate in my interviews, I again used my networks in addition to snowball sampling.

Prior to the beginning of the interviews, the participants were all requested to read a verbal consent script, which outlined the purpose of my research. Additionally, they were given an exempt research information sheet to read, which contained a condensed version of the verbal consent script that they could keep. Both forms were approved through the IRB. The interviewees were informed that their participation in the research was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time or decline to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with. It was also explained in the form that the interview would be recorded unless the participant was uncomfortable with that, in which case only handwritten notes would be taken. Participants were informed that they may be asked if I could take pictures of any tattoos that were specifically mentioned during the interviews, and that they could decline this request. They were also informed that they would be given a gift card to Starbucks as a way to thank them for their participation in the study. The interviewees were given my

contact information as well as the contact information for my advisor in the event that they had any questions or issues regarding their participation. If the participants wanted documentation that linked them to the research study, they were able to sign the verbal consent script which would then be given to them for their own records. Once verbal or written consent was given, the interview began.

The interviews contained a total of thirteen questions, with some having their own sub questions that I could use if I felt that it would be beneficial to get more information in response to a particular question. The goal of the first few questions was to gather background information about the participants and to gauge how tattooed they were since it can be difficult to tell how inked someone was if they are completely covered up by clothing. After inquiring about who the participants were and what they did for a living, interviewees were asked how many tattoos they currently have, and which one was their first. They then were asked what the motivation or rationale was behind their first piece to establish how much meaning and thought they originally put into their tattoos. Similar questions were posed about their most recent ink and their favorite piece of tattoo as a way to see if what they valued within their artwork changed over time. They were also questioned about what factors they consider when deciding to get a tattoo, such as meaning, design, or aesthetic.

To establish how one's identity is shaped by their body modification and physical appearance as visibly tattooed person, the participants were questioned about whether they felt tattoos had impacted their sense of identity and self-expression. This was followed by an inquiry into the reason why they decided that they were going to get

tattoos in order to see if there were underlying influences involved in their decision-making process, such as peer pressure from their tattooed friends or growing up with inked family members. To answer one of the main research questions that shaped this thesis, Interviewees were then asked directly if the significance and meanings behind their tattoos had changed as they had gotten more. Interviewees were also asked if they were part of the tattoo community. If their answer was yes, they were requested to share more information about how they engage with the community. Lastly, the participants were asked if there was anything else that they had wanted to mention before the end of the interview, and I often also asked if they had any books, social media pages, or videos that they as tattoo enthusiast enjoyed, and thought may be beneficial to include in my research. For the tattoo artists specifically, I asked them follow-up questions related to their use of social media. This included questions about whether they felt social media had impacted the tattoo industry, and if they felt social media had changed the ways in which they do their jobs.

Given that I was using semi-structured interviews, I aimed to interview between ten and fifteen heavily tattooed people, which meant that at least 50% of their body was covered in ink and that their tattoos can be easily seen. Ultimately, I was able to speak with five visibly tattooed people who were not artists, nine tattoo artists, and one apprentice. Four of the visibility tattooed people either were from or lived in/near Tacoma, Washington, while the fifth visibly tattooed person lived in Colorado. Six of the tattoo artists as well as the apprentice were also from or lived in/near Tacoma, Washington. At the Seattle Tattoo Expo, I interviewed one artist who was from Portland,

Oregon, and spoke with two well-known artists from Anaheim, California. The following table displays information about the interviewees and includes the names that will be used in the following chapter when referring to their interview:

Table 4.3: Names and Additional Information for the Tattoo Artists and Tattoo Enthusiasts

Tattoo Artists	Tattoo Enthusiasts
Morgan (apprentice, two years of experience)	Tina (about 11 tattoos)
Jay (9 years of experience)	Amy (17 tattoos)
Mason (11 years of experience)	Maria (more than 20 tattoos)
Josh (about 13 years of experience)	Karoline (more than 30 tattoos)
Dean (14 years of experience)	Johanna (more than 40 tattoos)
Travis (15 years of experience)	
Jake (about 28 years of experience)	
Anthony (30 years of experience)	
John (48 years of experience)	
Chris (67 years of experience)	

These interviews were recorded with the Voice Memos app on my phone, and after the interviews were completed, the audio files were uploaded to a secured data storage device that only I had access to. From there, the audio files were downloaded to Trint, a transcription service. To perform thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning or themes within textual data, the transcripts were read multiple times to identify initial codes. These codes, which focused on key ideas, concepts, and feelings that were expressed by the interviewees, were then applied to each of the transcripts. Once all the codes were identified, they were then grouped together into common themes to ensure they accurately reflected my research

questions and objectives as well as represented the information shared during the interviews. The themes were then named and defined in a way that expressed their content as well as displayed their significance within the research. Lastly, a narrative account of these themes was written, which combined the information that was gathered during the interviews as well as my own analytical insights to provide a thorough account of the collected data (Bernard and Ryan 2010).

4.3: Participant Observation

My participant observation was inspired by Margo DeMello's discussion of the tattoo community in her book *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. In her book, DeMello mentioned that being part of the tattoo community means to engage with other people who have tattoos, to learn more about tattoos, and to become an active participant by living a lifestyle where tattoos play an important role (DeMello 2000). One of the ways in which this can be accomplished is through attending events that are tattoo-oriented, such as conventions. Thus, I decided to attend the Seattle Tattoo Expo on August 20th, 2022, alongside my sister, aunt, and my cousin (see figure 4.4). In addition to getting to explore the entire venue and visiting multiple booths, we had the chance to participate as audience members in their "Worst Tattoo" contest as well as view their burlesque show. We did intend to get flash tattoos at the event and put our names down on a list, but unfortunately there was an extremely long wait, and we did have to commute back from Seattle to Tacoma. Walking around the expo, I was able to take photos of the booths, and noted what other items were available for purchase at the expo. I was also able to take notes regarding how some of the tattoo

artists were, where they were from, and what shops they represented. I also took observatory notes of how the artists were interacting with each other and how the eventgoers interacted with one another and the artists. All the observation notes from the tattoo expo were recorded on my iPhone utilizing the Notes app, and they were later downloaded onto my secured laptop.



Figure 4.4 Seattle Tattoo Expo (Photograph taken by Delanee Taylor)

In addition to describing how conventions are places where the tattoo community can be seen, DeMello also mentioned that the tattoo community and culture can be found in the tattoo shops. She explained that for new researchers, “...the tattoo shop remains the most important place for the newcomer to learn about tattooing: who gets tattooed, what

kinds of tattoos are available, how the process occurs, and what the relationship between artist and customer is” (DeMello 2000, 19-20). To supplement my interviews, I conducted participant observation at the tattoo parlors where I interviewed artists. Observation typically occurred before and after the interviews. I took pictures of the shops and took notes regarding the conversations between the artists and the interactions between them and their clients. Special attention was also paid to the atmosphere of the shop, including the type of music that was playing and the artwork that decorated the walls and each tattoo station. My cousin who went to Seattle Tattoo Expo with me was also being tattooed at one of the shops where I was conducting interviews, and he kindly allowed me to come along and observe the process, giving me the chance to ask the artist some questions about their shop and how they utilize social media. These notes were handwritten in a notebook and later typed up.

At the time of conducting my field research, I personally was being tattooed every three to four months while between quarters and living in Denver. One of these appointments occurred during the time when I was conducting fieldwork, so I was able to record observational notes about the tattoo process as well as document my own experience with my tattoo artist. To do this, I again utilized the Notes app on my iPhone and was able to upload them at a later time.

4.4: Positionality

When undertaking ethnographic research, it is important for one to consider how their own position may affect their perception as well as impact the kind of knowledge that others are willing to share with them. In this case, my appearance likely had a

positive effect on my interactions with the interviewees. For example, when speaking with a well-known U.S. tattooer at the Seattle Tattoo Expo, the artist was not interested in talking with me until I showed him my tattoos. After stating this request, I was swiftly turned around by my aunt and sister who then took my backpack and moved aside my tank top straps so that he could see the tattoos I have across my shoulders. Once he had looked at my ink, the artist said that he would speak with me, and I was invited into his booth to sit and chat about my project. Out of curiosity, I had asked him why he wanted to see my tattoos before speaking with me, and he shared that he had given interviews with non-tattooed people in the past, and that he felt they had not understood what he meant when talking about aspects of tattoo culture and the tattoo community. After this interaction, I realized that I was likely being identified as an insider or a member of the tattoo community when interacting with the artists and tattoo enthusiasts during my interviews.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit a couple of the tattoo artists that I interviewed. I am extremely fortunate to be tattooed by an artist who is well established within the Tacoma tattooing community and was willing to aid me with my interviews by providing the names of a few shops and artists that would likely speak with a graduate student. A couple of the other tattooists that I spoke with were also willing to reach out to their friends at other shops on my behalf to find more participants for their interviews, which was greatly appreciated. Without the relationship that I have established with my own tattoo artist, it is likely that I would not have been able to visit as many tattoo shops and interview as many artists as I did.

While being considered as an “insider” to a community may have its advantages, it is also important to recognize the ways in which it can have negative effects on research. It must be acknowledged that because my thesis is on tattooing and social media, which are two topics that I previously had researched, it is likely that my initial research questions as well as thoughts and perceptions going into this research were biased in that they were shaped by my own experiences and the research that I had done. Thus, I acknowledge that my positionality may have affected the information that was shared with me, and that it is a factor that I must continue to be aware of when analyzing my data.

At the same time, it is vital to consider the other ways in which my personal identity and experiences may have shaped the direction of my thesis as well as how my previous experience with tattoo and social media related research may have impacted the factors that I addressed with both the survey and semi-structured interviews. For example, I identify as a cis-hetero woman, and my gender identity is an important aspect of my life. Gender identity is also a topic that has been discussed by multiple tattoo researchers, with many of them focusing on the ways in which perceptions regarding tattooed women have changed throughout history. Thus, I focused on gender as being an important factor when initially creating the questions for my survey as well as when conducting my semi-structured interviews. Another factor that I originally had focused on when collecting data for this thesis was age. The fact that I am part of Gen Z, which has been referred to as iGen, means that I grew up having access to the Internet and am thus considered as a digital native. As a result, I likely concentrated more on how there are

generational gaps when it comes to thoughts regarding the benefits of social media within spaces such as the tattoo industry and place greater importance on understanding how our online lives are becoming more integrated with our offline lives as social media usage has increased. I am also Caucasian, and prior to conducting this research, most of the experiences that I had interacting with artists and other members of the tattoo community were with people who also appeared to be white. As a result of this, I did not consider how someone's ethnicity and racial background could have an effect on the ways in which survey respondents and interview participants answered questions regarding their tattoos, social media usage, and identity. I also did not adequately consider how one's socioeconomic status could impact the ways in which the research participants responded to particular questions, and how this aspect of their life could shape their thoughts and behaviors with regards to tattooing, social media, and their identity. As the concluding paragraph of this thesis will mention, these factors such as socioeconomic status and ethnic and racial identities were not explored within this thesis, however they are still important factors that should be examined by tattoo researchers.

4.5: Ethical Considerations and Limitations

With regards to ethical considerations, one of the biggest concerns involved the protection of collected data. This included the information that was collected from the surveys as well as from the interviews. As mentioned above, all data was stored on password protected devices such as my iPhone and laptop, and the information was accessible only to me. The survey data was stored through Qualtrics on a password protected account that only I had access to. Similarly, the interview data was stored

through Trint on a password protected account that only I had the login information for and therefore was only accessible to me. For the interviews, direct identifiers were coded to ensure that the identity of the participants was protected, and their anonymity maintained. One concern that arose specifically from the interviews was the fact that participants could experience emotional discomfort when discussing the personal reasonings, meanings, or significance behind their tattoos. Thus, it was important to consider the risks of insensitivity, and it was vital that the participants' autonomy always be considered when conducting fieldwork and their confidentiality maintained. One of the main goals with regards to ethical considerations for the interviews was ensuring that the representation of the tattoo community be fair and that the study respects the participants' dignity. Similarly, with the surveys the goal was also to accurately represent the data that was collected from the participants while respecting their anonymity. Hence, thorough consent forms were utilized to ensure that open and transparent communication always occurred. Both forms made it clear to participants that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, and that if they felt uncomfortable with any questions, then they did not need to answer them. They could also withdraw consent to participate at any time. Ethical approval for this thesis was obtained from the institutional review board at the University of Denver on July 26th, 2022 (IRBNet Protocol #: 1909567-1), which assured that this study followed all of the necessary ethical guidelines and principles.

Before discussing the specific limitations that impacted this thesis, I feel that it is important first to describe the two main data collection methods that were utilized while conducting research as well as discuss their benefits and drawbacks. Surveys are a form

of structured interviewing where participants answer the same questions and there are predetermined limited responses that the respondents can choose from (Bernard and Ryan 2018). Given that it is a structured form of data collection, surveys allow ethnographers to test quantitatively for hypotheses that they generated from the formative theories that they used to link variable domains to one another. Ethnographers can then use the information from the surveys to refine themes or support the themes and concepts that they identified when doing research for their project or collecting other forms of data (Schensul and LeCompte 2010). One of the main strengths of using surveys is that they can be distributed via the internet, which could allow for the survey to reach more people and therefore allow for a greater collection of responses. Conducting surveys can also be time consuming, so by distributing the questionnaire online, the ethnographer is able to focus their attention on other forms of data collection that must be completed through face-to-face interactions. Another major benefit of conducting surveys is that the quantitative data can later be analyzed to explore the association between two or more variables that occur either within or across the domains and factors that the study is exploring. However, creating an online survey can be difficult given that it requires the ethnographer to create a culturally and socially valid questionnaire that can identify relevant questions as well as potential responses that the respondents would give. Additionally, the ethnographer does not have control over the ways in which the posed questions and responses may be interpreted by the survey participants, and if there is a misunderstanding about the questions or responses, then the ethnographer is not present to provide clarification. Another issue that can arise when conducting an online survey is

that there may be some people who are not participating in the questionnaire in good faith. As a result, after collecting all of the survey responses, the ethnographer must perform data cleaning to ensure that the data being analyzed is as accurate as possible. Lastly, it is important that the ethnographer considers the ways in which their online survey is distributed and how that could potentially lead to data that is biased or does not accurately represent the population that the survey intended to target.

Semi-structured interviews are another type of data collection, and it can be used in combination with more structured methods such as surveys. One of the main purposes for using a semi-structured data collection technique such as a semi-structured interview is that it allows for the ethnographer "...to find patterns within cases (individual respondents or events) and themes (factors and variables that cut across multiple cases) in a qualitative data set" (Schensul and LeCompte 2010). For these types of interviews, the questions that are being asked are predetermined, and they relate specifically to the study questions as well as the research domains. This way, the ethnographer can explore the domains or factors that have already been deemed as being important to the study while also giving the interviewees the freedom to offer their own insights, which may provide the ethnographer with new perspectives and significant factors that they had not discovered during their research or through other means of data collection. Thus, the major benefit that semi-structured interviews have is that their flexibility allows for the interviewees to expand upon the questions being asked while producing focused, qualitative textual that displays variation at the variable level, which means that the ethnographer can then analyze the data to look for patterned similarities and differences.

Additionally, by utilizing an approach that includes guided questions that are also open-ended, the interviewer can collect a large amount of data without needing to interview someone multiple times, which is significant given that interviews can be time consuming and therefore difficult to schedule (Bernard and Ryan 2018). One of the drawbacks that can come with this method however is that because the interview guides are created in a way that allows for elaboration, the interviewee could share information that is not necessarily relevant to the ethnographer's research. Hence, the interviewer must pay close attention and be ready to steer the conversation back to the question that they originally asked if needed. At the same time, the interviewer must be ready to ask additional probing questions if they feel like they did not get enough information from the interviewee in order to adequately answer the posed questions. As one can see, both surveys and semi-structured interviews have their benefits as well as drawbacks when it comes to data collection. When used together, however, they provide the opportunity for one to fully explore the significant factors and themes that exist within their research.

There were three specific limitations that impacted the data collection and findings of this thesis. The first involves the way in which my online survey was distributed. Given the sampling strategy that I employed and how the survey distributed it through my personal social media accounts, there is a limitation to the scope of answers that it provides. Hence, the data that was collected from the survey cannot be seen as being representative of how all tattooed people and non-tattooed people that are internet users view tattoos and social media. As such, it is not possible to draw large conclusions based solely on this collected data. There was also an issue with the way that the survey

was distributed specifically on Reddit. The title I used for the posts when sharing the survey to r/SampleSize and r/SurveyExchange was “Survey about Tattoos and Social Media (+18).” The posts included a link to the survey as well as a short IRB approved description regarding who the intended audience was and how long the questionnaire would take to be completed. In that description, I noted that the survey was “...intended for people who are active on social media and are either considering getting a tattoo or already have at least one tattoo.” When I reposted the survey to these subreddits, they gained much more attention, with the survey on r/SampleSize receiving 47 upvotes. However, there was one redditor who commented on the post, stating that I should have included the intended audience in my demographic tag alongside the +18 tag. This was something that I had considered when creating the titles and descriptions that would be used in my social media posts given that they had to be submitted to the IRB and approved before being shared on my platforms. The reason why I had chosen to include information about the intended audience in the post description rather than the title was because posts that had longer titles seemed to gain less initial attention and subsequently less participants than the posts with short titles. I was hoping that if the title of my posts captured the attention of other redditors, then they would click on my post and read the description before taking the survey. While I did get a significant number of responses to my survey, both from social media users who already have tattoos and those are interested in getting one in the future, I do think that the title I used with these posts could have suggested that I was only interested in hearing from people who are tattooed and use

social media. Thus, my survey responses from people who were social media users and had yet to get their first tattoo may have been limited by this decision.

The second limitation occurred when contacting tattoo shops and artists to look for participants in my interviews as well as finding field sites where I could conduct participant observation. When discussing his own fieldwork in tattoo shops, Force notes that participant observation was useful because “In many shops, enthusiasts and recurrent clients hang around in common spaces which provided opportunity to observe interaction extraneous to the actual tattooing process” (Force 2020). I had seen similar situations occur in the shop where I was regularly getting tattooed, which is why I originally decided to take inspiration from Force’s work to include tattoo shops as part of my field sites. However, while none of these tattoo shops were private studios, my fieldwork was conducted in the summer of 2022 at a time when Covid-19 was still impacting many businesses in Washington state, including tattoo shops. Due to the pandemic, when the parlors were allowed to reopen, many had switched to functioning as appointment-only shops as opposed to allowing walk-in clients. Clients were also not allowed to bring anyone else to their appointments. Thus, it was difficult to find tattoo shops that were willing to allow a graduate student to come in and conduct research. This was a limitation that had been considered when planning out my research, and potential solutions had been discussed. Originally, my plan was to visit six different shops throughout Tacoma, Washington where I hoped to interview one tattoo artist and conduct participant observation over the course of two to three additional visits. Instead, I visited three tattoo shops in Tacoma and one shop located in the city of Federal Way. At two of the Tacoma-

based shops, I was able to interview two artists and conducted my participant observation on the same days that the interviews were done.

The last limitation that I had not planned for was personally contracting Covid-19 less than a week prior to conducting my first artist interviews and shop visits. Thankfully, many of the tattooists were understanding and willing to reschedule their interview with me. As a result of this though, the timeframe for data collection was shortened as I had to be sure that there was no risk of spreading Covid-19 to any of the artists I interviewed or to their clients. Although I did receive more recommendations for shops and artists that I could visit near Tacoma, there was unfortunately not enough time to contact these shops to set up interviews and visits for performing participant observation before I had to fly back to Denver for the beginning of the next school year. There was a plan to contact the shops during the following quarter in order to visit them while I would be home during winter break, but after discussing this with my primary and secondary advisors, it was decided that enough data had already been collected to adequately answer my research questions.

Chapter 5: Findings

Now that the theoretical framework and methodology for this thesis has been established, the findings of the research can be presented. In the first part of this chapter, I explain through the use of descriptive statistics as well as figures the results of my online survey and discuss how they compare to other surveys on tattooing or social media. This section addresses what social media platforms are being utilized by current and future members of the tattoo community as well as notes the ways in which these digital spaces may affect the lives and identities of those who interact with the platforms. Additionally, this section examines the motivations that exist behind people's decisions to become inked and how tattoos can impact their sense of identity.

In the second part of this chapter, I focus on thematic analysis and draw from both the responses of the interviewees and the information that was collected while conducting participant observation at the tattoo parlors I visited as well as the 2022 Seattle Tattoo Exposition. Similar topics and themes have been discussed by other tattoo researchers to display an accurate understanding of the ways in which contemporary tattooing is being utilized and perceived by people within the United States. In order to answer the second set of research questions that were mentioned in the previous chapter, the semi-structured interviews were also analyzed to explore whether the meanings and significance of tattoos change as the interviewees add more ink to their collections.

The survey results display how social media has influenced both the tattoo industry and the daily lives of internet users. Findings from the survey demonstrate how social media is an important tool that is being used by members of the tattoo community as well as those who are looking to become tattooed in the future. The interviews and participant observation establish how everyone goes on different journeys when it comes to their tattoos, and that there are a variety of motivations behind a person's ink. In addition to allowing the tattooed person to visually show various aspects of their identity, the thematic analysis illustrates how one's ink can be used to affect the way in which they are perceived by others in either positive or negative ways.

5.1: Survey Results

As previously mentioned, one of the main research goals for this study was to explore how social media has changed the practice of tattooing as well as how social media is being utilized when people decide to seek out tattoo-related content. In order to have a significant number of responses from people who are both social users and are interested in tattoos or have their own ink, it was decided that an online survey would be the best approach. The surveys were then distributed through social media platforms, which included Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Reddit. When the survey was officially closed, Qualtrics reported that there was a total of 280 respondents. However, for the purposes of this research, I decided to only look at the responses from the participants who completed the survey (n= 214). Hence, I eliminated a small number of surveys where the participants offered conflicting responses to certain

questions or where their answers indicated that they were not included in the intended audience for survey respondents.

5.1.1: Social Media-Related Responses

After collecting demographic information, the survey questions changed focus to gaining some insights regarding the social media usage of the participants. One question that the participants were asked was what social media platforms they use. They were allowed to choose multiple options, and there was an additional option where respondents could select “Other” and then use a textbox to add any additional social media platforms that they use that were not listed. Figure 5.1 shows the social media platforms that were directly listed included Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Reddit. Reddit was the most popular choice with 182 respondents indicating that they used this platform. This was followed by YouTube, which is used by 166 of the respondents, and Instagram, which 163 participants indicated using. Next came Facebook with 126 respondents utilizing the platform, and X (formerly known as Twitter) with 79 participants choosing it as part of their response. Pinterest received 70 choices and Snapchat was used by 63 survey respondents. There were also 41 participants who selected “Other” and mentioned additional platforms that they used, which commonly included TikTok, Discord, and Tumblr.

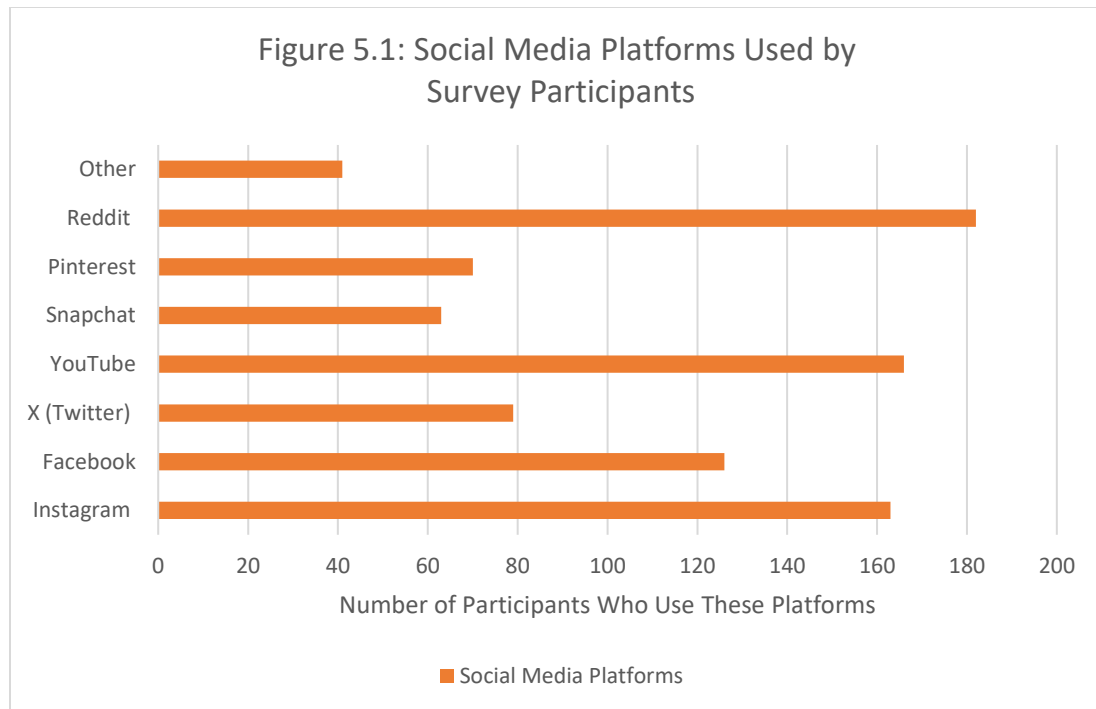


Figure 5.1: Count of responses to survey question: "What social media platforms do you use? (select all answers that apply)"

5.1.2: Discussing the Social Media Platforms

As mentioned in the background chapter of this thesis, Reddit is a popular platform, however it sees only 430 million users per month, which is fewer monthly users than seen on sites such as Instagram and Facebook (Curry 2023). Thus, I was a bit surprised to see that Reddit was the most used platform in this survey. However, this survey was posted twice to two different subreddits, with one receiving 47 upvotes. It is possible that Reddit was chosen the most out of these social media platforms because many of the participants found the survey through Reddit. It was not surprising however to see that YouTube was the second most popular used social media site due to the fact that it is currently the second most popular network in the world. I was originally shocked to see that Facebook was not chosen by respondents over Instagram given that it is the

most popular social media platform in the world. Taking age into account however, a 2023 survey from Statista found that Gen Z, especially those who live in the United States, are more likely to use Instagram than they are to use Facebook (Ceci 2023b). Considering that 43.06% of the survey respondents indicated that they are between 18 and 24 years old, it is likely that my survey report showed Instagram as being more popular than Facebook as a result of the age of the participants.

5.1.3: Social Media-Related Responses Continued

The participants were also asked how they use social media and were told to select all answers that apply. It was discovered that 207 respondents utilize social media for entertainment purposes. Answers to this question indicated that social media is often used to keep in touch with friends and family, an answer that was selected by 173 of the participants. Following this, 147 individuals indicated that they use social media to stay up to date on the news and current events while 59 survey respondents noted they use social media for business and work purposes.

Following this, respondents were asked to either agree or disagree with the statement “Social media is important to your sense of identity.” The answers that they could choose from included “strongly agree”, “somewhat agree”, “neither agree or disagree”, “somewhat disagree”, and “strongly disagree”. Of the 214 responses to this question, the option “somewhat disagree” was chosen the most and accounted for 70 people or 32.71% of the answers to this question. This was followed by “strongly disagree,” which was chosen by 28.97% of the respondents, which equaled 62 individuals. 38 people who selected that they “neither agree nor disagree” with the idea

that social media is important to their sense of identity. 34 people (15.89%) indicated that they “somewhat agree” with the statement, and only 10 survey respondents (4.67%) strongly agree (see Figure 5.2). Following the same formatting and response types, the survey respondents were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Social media is important to your life.” 100 respondents said that they “Somewhat agree” that social media is important in their life, which accounted for 46.73% of the responses for this question. There were 44 people, or 20.56% of the individuals who answered this question by selecting that they “neither agree nor disagree,” while 15.89% or 34 of the respondents noted that they strongly agree with the statement. 25 people chose that they “somewhat disagree” with the posed statement, accounting for 11.68% of the responses to this question, and 11 people (5.14%) strongly disagreeing with the idea that social media is important in their life (see Figure 5.3).

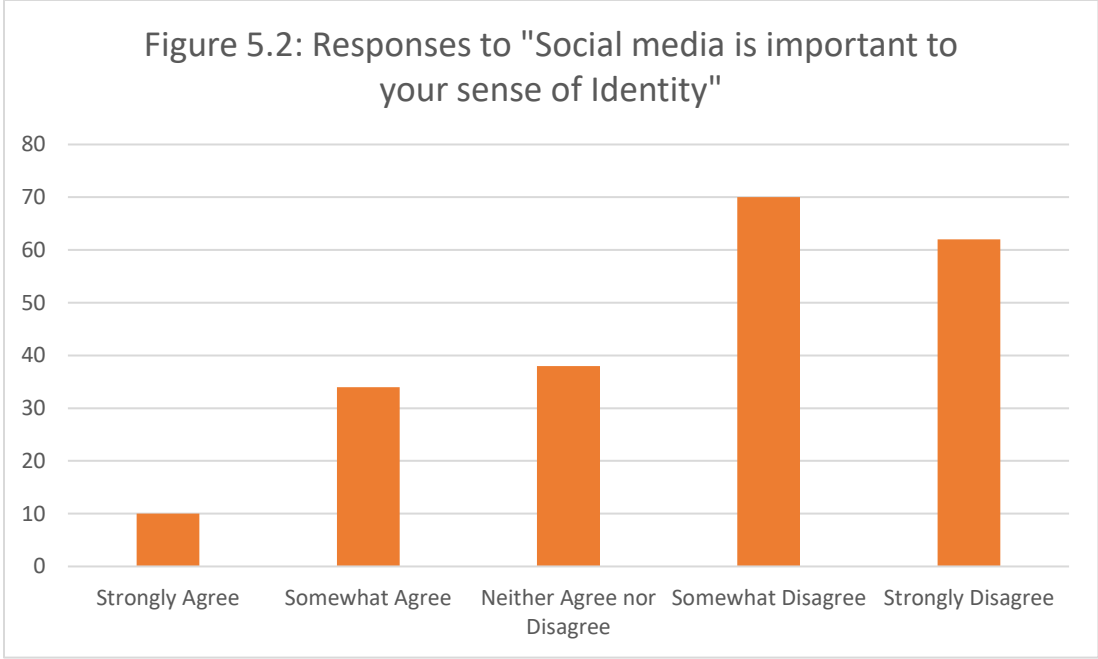


Figure 5.2: Total counts (N=214) of responses to the survey question: "Agree or Disagree: Social Media is important to your sense of identity."

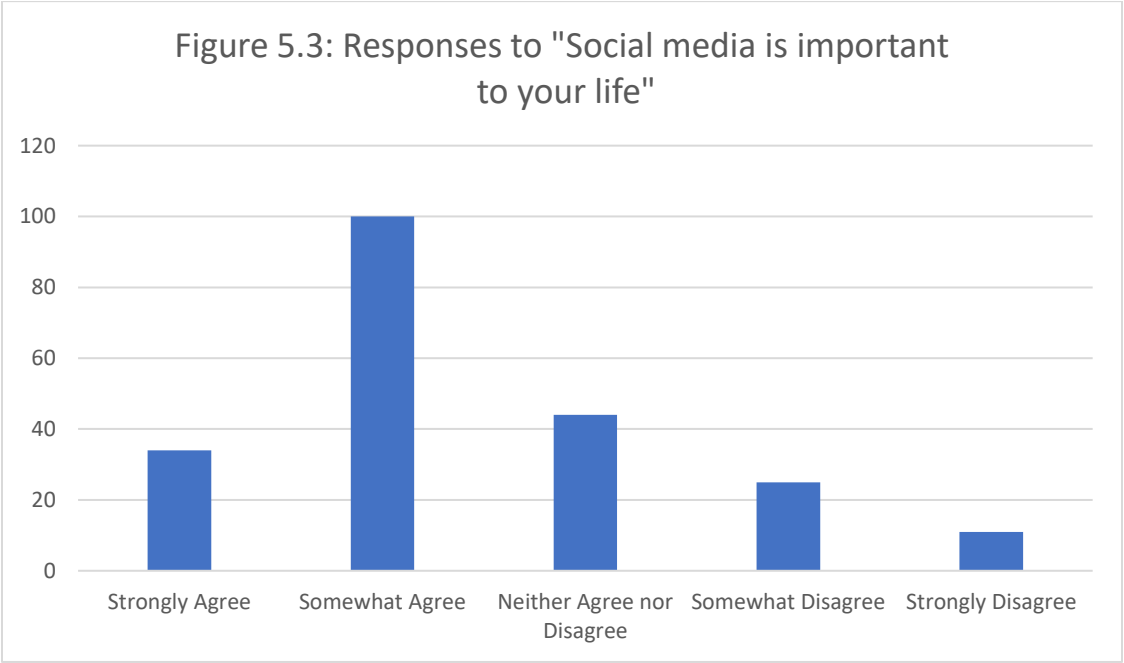


Figure 5.3: Total Counts (N=214) of the responses to the survey question: "Agree or Disagree: Social Media is important to your life."

Lastly, to gain a clearer idea of how the respondents are directly participating and interacting with others on social media platforms, the survey participants were asked if they were part of any communities or groups on the social media platforms that they use. If they were, the respondents were then asked to elaborate on how they were involved with communities or groups through social media. 214 of the survey respondents answered this question, and 124 of them (57.94%) answered yes to this question, while 90 individuals (42.06%) answered no. Looking at some of the responses that people left if they answered yes to the question, one person noted that they were part of a women's traveling group. Another was involved in a group for traveling medical technicians. A number of participants were involved in communities that focused on video games, and others mentioned that they participated in groups that were focused on their courses at university. A few respondents noted that they were involved in community groups through social media for their work and other professional associations. Additionally, multiple people noted that they had joined various tattoo-based communities, with one person mentioning the r/tattoos subreddit and another explaining that they have joined tattoo groups in their area.

5.1.4: Tattoo-Related Responses

One of my primary research questions focused on exploring how social media is being utilized when people seek out tattoo-related content. Another one of my research objectives was to understand how tattoos may be used as a way for a person to express or explore parts of their identity. The following questions were designed specifically to be

able to explore these research goals, and their responses were highly significant within this thesis.

The first tattoo-related question that respondents were asked with regards to social media is what platforms they have used to view tattoo content, and they were encouraged to select all answers that apply. Looking at Figure 5.4, one can see that Instagram was the most popular choice with 158 participants indicating that they use the platform to view tattoo related content. The second most popular answer was Reddit, an option that was selected by 119 respondents. Pinterest was chosen by 87 individuals and YouTube was selected by 53 participants. Facebook received 45 selections, while 19 people noted that they use X (Twitter) and only 4 individuals indicated that they use Snapchat to view tattoo-related content. Once again, participants were given the option to utilize a textbox to include other platforms that were not initially listed in this question. From these responses, TikTok and Tumblr were once again listed by multiple individuals as platforms that they have also used to view tattoo-related content. There were also a couple of respondents who noted that they simply utilized Google Images when looking for tattoo-related content.

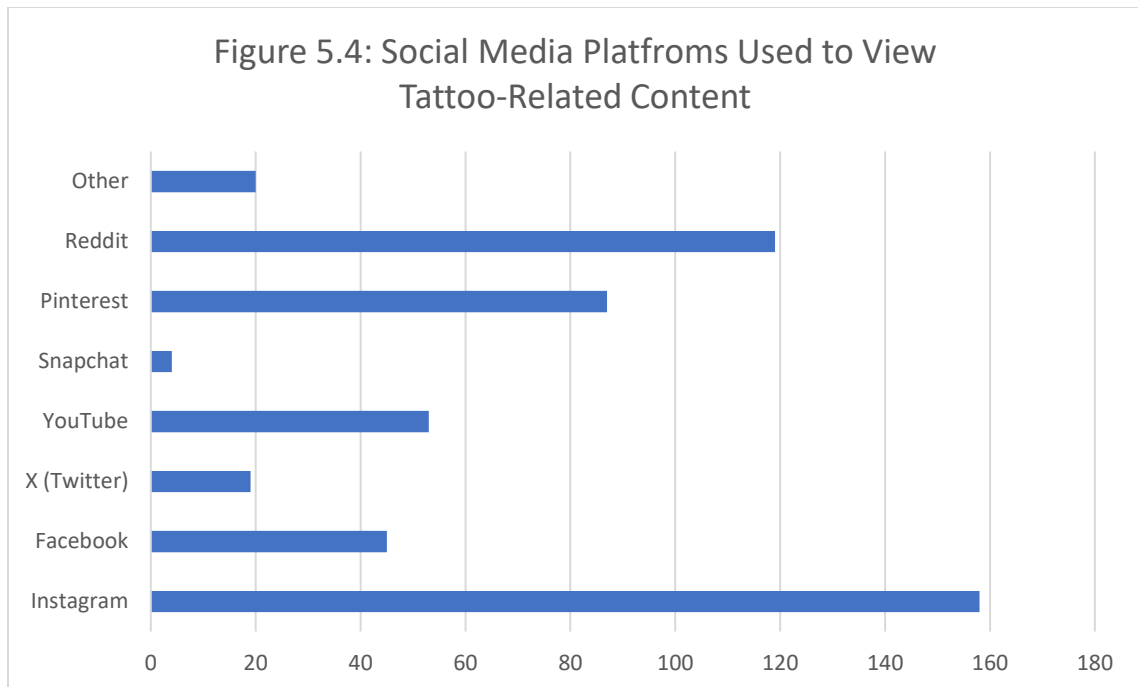


Figure 5.4: Counts of responses to the survey question: "What social media platforms have you used to view tattoo-related content? (select all answers that apply)"

Next, participants were asked what they are looking for when viewing tattoo related content, where they again were encouraged to select as many answers as applied. The most popular response with 165 selections by the respondents was design inspiration (see Figure 5.5). Tattoo styles was the second most popular answer as it was chosen by 151 respondents, and artist profiles with 137 selections were found to be the third most popular response. 83 respondents also noted that they view tattoo-related content for entertainment purposes, while 73 people were using social media to look at the profiles of tattoo parlors. Of the 11 people who opted to use the textbox, one person noted that they look at tattoo-related content on social media to gain information on what to expect when getting a tattoo. Someone else noted that they looked for aftercare advice and information

on maintaining tattoos. There were even a couple of respondents who said that they specifically liked to look for bad or cringey tattoos.

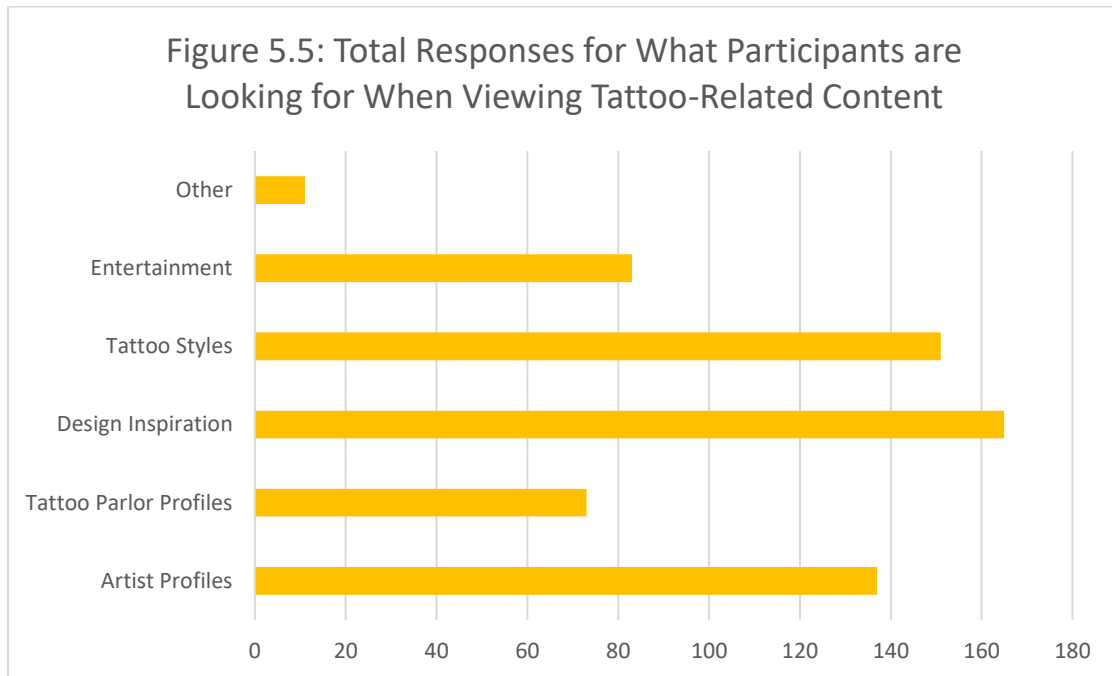


Figure 5.5: Count of responses to the survey question: "What are you looking at/for in tattoo-related content? (select all answers that apply)"

One of the last questions included in this survey asked participants to agree or disagree with the statement "Tattoos are important to your sense of identity and expression." For this question, I only examined the responses of participants who indicated that they have at least one tattoo, given that people who do not have tattoos yet may not be able to accurately answer this question without having gone through the experience of getting a tattoo and becoming a tattooed person. With this question it became clear that tattoos can be an important part of someone's identity given that out of 164 tattooed participants, 66 respondents (40.24%) indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement and 64 participants (39.02%) somewhat agreed with the idea that

tattoos are important to their sense of identity and expression (see Figure 5.6). 25 individuals (15.24%) denoted that they viewed this statement neutrally, while 8 participants (4.88%) somewhat disagreed with the statement. Only one person strongly disagreed with the statement, accounting for less than 1% of the responses.

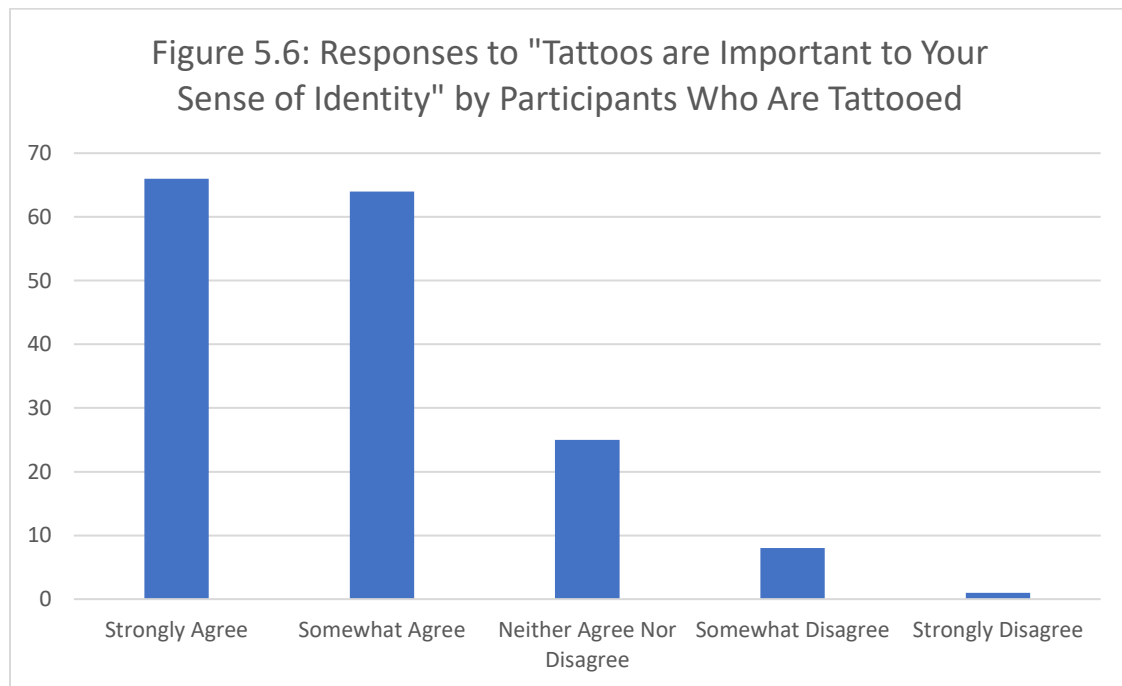


Figure 5.6: Counts of responses to the survey question: "Agree or Disagree: Tattoos are important to your sense of identity." This figure only displays the responses of respondents who indicated that they already have at least one tattoo (N=164).

5.1.5: Discussing the Influences on Participants' Decision to Become Tattooed

Finally, participants were asked about what influenced their decision to get tattoos. When examining the data, it was found that the most popular reason behind why people chose to become tattooed or are interested in becoming tattooed in the future is because of aesthetic purposes, which accounted for 33.67% of the data that was collected for this question. The second most popular response to this question was the participants'

desire to convey a personal story or meaning through the practice of tattooing, which was chosen by 28.87% of the survey respondents. Interestingly, the data indicated that there was a difference in responses from participants who are already tattooed and those who are looking to become inked in the future when viewing the third most popular answer to this question. With regards to the data collected from the participants who stated that they already inked, at 8.68% the third most popular response to the question of what influenced their decision to become tattooed was that their peers were also inked. This was different from the participants who stated that they have yet to become tattooed, where at 10%, the third most chosen response to the survey question was that they were influenced by pop culture.

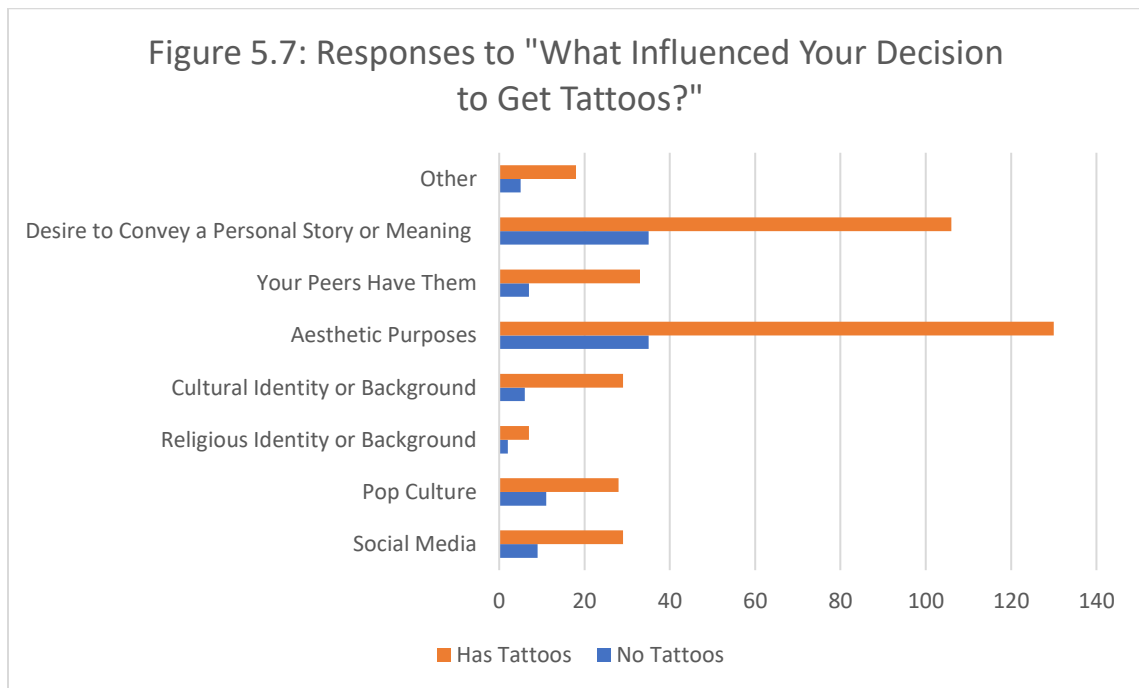


Figure 5.7: Count of responses to survey question: "What influenced your decision to get tattoos? (select all answers that apply)"

Additionally, there were some survey participants who decided to write in a response regarding what has influenced their decision to get a tattoo. One of the participants who has yet to get any tattoos wrote that they were looking to get a tattoo as a way to cover up their scar. Someone else said that they are planning to get tattooed because “I have a medical condition that I plan to get both medical and artistic tattoos for.” Of the tattooed respondents, one person simply wrote that “I just like them, they’re part of who I am,” while someone else said “I’ve always loved tattoos. Art is beautiful. I got my first tattoo on my 16th birthday.” Another tattooed person expressed that they were influenced to get tattoos because they offer “a sense of control.” A couple of people mentioned that they were influenced by their fathers who had tattoos, with one person saying, “My father was covered in them from head to toe, so I always wanted to be like him.” Four tattooed people also wrote that they got a tattoo with the purpose of covering up a scar. There was also one response that stood out to me, and it came from a tattooed transgender person who wrote

“I remember hearing about the concept as a young child and really connecting with it. I think a major part is taking ownership of my body. As a trans person, I often feel like I don’t really have control over my body. It decided my sex should be different than my gender, and I can’t really change that since I’m genderfluid, and mostly androgynous/both genders at once. Tattoos are personal things that I decided to get and my body cannot change that.”

This quote in particular is significant in that it highlights how tattooing can be utilized as a tool for positively shaping one’s identity. These written survey responses are also

important in that they indicate how tattoos in contemporary society have become visual devices that have the ability to influence people's body image, which in turn can impact self-esteem and confidence.

5.1.6: Conclusion of Survey Results:

Reviewing these results, one can see that social media has become an increasingly influential force, not only within the tattoo industry but also in the daily lives of internet users. As the survey revealed, social media has become an important tool within the tattoo industry. For some participants, these platforms are useful for finding design inspiration for their next tattoos or for finding entertaining content about tattoos, while others may use them to examine the work of tattoo artists or to find more information about the process of tattooing and what they should expect when getting their first piece of ink. Although different platforms are being used for a variety of purposes when it comes to viewing tattoo-related content, all this information is valuable because it ultimately displays how social media is contributing to the increasing visibility of the tattoo community. Lastly, the survey results began to reveal the importance of major concepts such as identity and self-confidence being formed and shaped through tattooing, which will be discussed further in the section below.

5.2: Thematic Analysis and Participant Observation

In the methodology chapter, it was explained that the second main research question of this thesis asked how tattoos are used to express or explore the differing facets of a person's identity as well as how the meanings and significance behind people's

tattoos change as they add to their permanent ink collection. Based on personal experience as well as discussions with friends, I wondered if tattooed people would begin to value meaning and significance less as they acquired more tattoos. To answer this question and gain a greater understanding of how people view their ink, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both tattoo artists and heavily tattooed people. The interviews focused on establishing what the motivations were behind the interviewee's first tattoos as well as what their rationale was behind their most recent tattoo. Similarly to the online survey respondents, interview participants were asked about what influenced their decision to become tattooed, and they were asked if their tattoos have impacted their sense of identity. The interviews also sought to establish what the participants consider when they decide to get more ink, such as meaning, design, or aesthetic, and they were questioned about whether they intend to convey something through their permanent artwork. Interviewees were then asked about their thoughts regarding the existence of the tattoo community, and if they felt that it existed. After the interviews were transcribed and analyzed, it became clear that they were key ideas and common concepts being expressed by the interviewees as they answered these questions and thought about their own tattoos as well as the tattoo community. Many of the perceptions that the interviewees held were noted to occur during the participant observation that was conducted at tattoo parlors as well as the Seattle Tattoo Expo. Thus, the following thematic analysis is a detailed exploration of these themes and includes excerpts from the interview transcripts as well as notes that were taken during periods of participant observation.

5.2.1: Creating Kinship Through the Art of Tattooing

Kinship is a complex and historically significant topic within the field of anthropology. Traditionally, the term was defined by blood, meaning “relationships that are based on the biological connections created through sex and birth, or conception and parturition” (Parkin and Stone 2004, 2). As anthropologists continued to study kinship through a variety of contexts, it became clear that kinship is about more than who people are related to by blood. Today, kinship is often described as being a sociocultural construction where people create networks of social and biological relationships (Carsten 2023). In chapters two and three, it was explained how tattoos are regarded as visual symbols of communication by many researchers, and that throughout various cultures, this artform has been used to construct identities as well as establish connections between groups of people, including between kin. For some people, this may mean that they get matching tattoos to symbolize their connections. Others may express their kinship through the subject matter of their tattoos, or even by allowing a loved one to create or perform the tattooing themselves. There are also those who may seek out tattooing as a way to honor those that they have lost and viewed as being significant individuals in their lives. Hence, tattooing can be a valuable way for people to display their relationships with their friends and family members, which was seen throughout the interviews that were conducted as part of this research.

As mentioned above, there are some people who choose to get tattoos as a symbol of the relationships that they have built with close friends. While speaking with tattoo enthusiast Amy about her ink, she shared that her first tattoo was of a sunset, and that it

was a matching design that she got with her two best friends. She explained that she had always wanted to get tattoos, and that she thought it would be a good idea to get matching ones with her best friends before moving across the country to attend university. The decision to have the tattoo be of a sunset originated from the name of the primary school where Amy had met her two best friends back in kindergarten. She also credited her two best friends as being the reasons why she began to collect her own tattoos when she saw how thrilled they were by their permanent artwork, which encouraged her to pursue this route of body modification. Amy then showed me one of her more recent tattoos, which was of a small strawberry that she had gotten with her two of her friends in New York. When asked why they had decided on a matching strawberry tattoo, Amy shared that the design itself was not necessarily significant. One of her friends decided that she wanted a strawberry, and the other thought that the design was cute and agreed. Amy then explained that she had been planning to get a strawberry tattoo at some point as a symbol of the yearly strawberry festival that occurred near her hometown, which she always attended with her family, so she agreed on the matching design with her two friends. Amy went on to say that the sunset and strawberry tattoos were her favorite because they hold deeper meaning for her and are representative of the special people that are in her life. Another interviewee, Maria, expressed that she too had gotten her first tattoo as a way to recognize the connection between her and her friends. In her situation, Maria explained that she and some friends had taken a trip to Los Angeles, and that while they were there, they made a collective spur of the moment decision to all go and get tattooed together. They rushed to the nearest parlor, and each picked a flash design off the wall. Maria

chose to get a butterfly on her back, and although the ink has since been covered up, it was still a symbol of the relationships that Maria had created with her friends and the trip that they had taken together.

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of parents who have been seeking to get tattoos that are representative of their children, which one tattoo artist described as being the ultimate expression of love (Marrazzo 2012). I observed one example of this when interviewing tattoo artist Mason about his newest tattoo, and he displayed a single-needle micro portrait of his son. When I jokingly asked if the motivation behind the tattoo was that he loved his son, Mason laughed and said “Oh yeah, he’s alright” before going on to say that the portrait was based on a silly, fun picture of his son that he and his wife love. For some tattoo artists, they are able to take this a step further by having a permanent piece of art on their bodies that was tattooed there by their child. During an interview with another tattoo artist, Travis, he noted his favorite tattoo to be the rose that his daughter did on him when she was eight years old. He explained that at the time, she would spend the summer months with him, and that instead of going to a daycare or hanging out with other kids, she would ask to work on her drawings with her dad. She would go to the tattoo shop with him and sit at the light box station to work on her drawings and Travis began to teach her how to draw different flowers. He told her that if she practiced enough, then before she went back to her mom’s house for school, she could tattoo a rose on him. Travis explained that she would practice drawing her rose every day, and that she has now become a talented artist, even if she does not always use her skills.

In the methodology chapter, it was mentioned that I was given the opportunity to attend the Seattle Tattoo Expo in August of 2022. While there, I was able to interview a well-known tattoo artist from Anaheim, California, and while talking about his ink collection, he showed me a tattoo that he had done on himself of his daughter's name over 44 years ago when she was born. He also tattooed himself again later with his youngest daughter's name when she was born almost 33 years ago. When I asked if he would allow me to take a photograph of those tattoos, he declined, explaining that he does not let anyone take pictures of those two tattoos because they are personal to him. However, he did allow me to photograph a different tattoo, which he explained was tattooed on him by his youngest daughter, who is now a successful tattoo artist in Houston, Texas (see figure 5.8) When asked about the design, he described how she had shown him her portfolio of skull tattoos, and that none of them were his style, which they both laughed about. Instead, he decided that he would draw up skull and crossbones, which she then tattooed on him. Through these tattoos, it is clear that these three artists care deeply for their children, and that they value the ability to carry reminders of this love permanently on their skin.

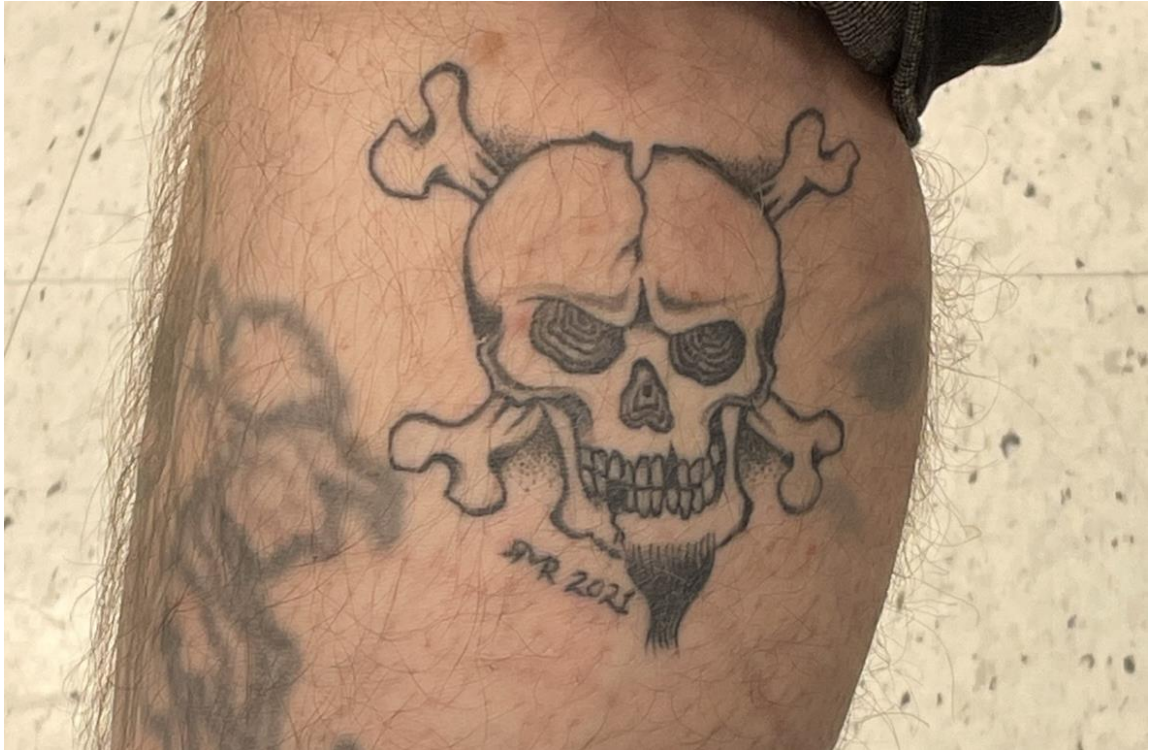


Figure 5.8: John's skull tattoo (photographed by Delanee Taylor)

Tattooing can also be an event that brings family members together. For example, when speaking with Travis about how he runs into people all over Tacoma who he has tattooed, he explained that “You know, now it’s like I’ve tattooed generations of families where I’ve tattooed parents and then their kids or started with the kids and then their younger siblings coming up and then their parents get tattooed. So, it’s just kind of cool.” This was reminiscent of my own experience given that I was the first person in my immediate family to get tattooed. A few months later, my mom and I had gone back to the same artist and got flower tattoos on our ankles. My mom has gotten more tattoos from that artist since then, and recently went with my dad to get matching cross tattoos for their 30th anniversary. Now, my older sister has begun making plans to get her first tattoo and is interested in getting a flower that is like the ones I and our mom already have.

Something I thought to be interesting was that while I was interviewing Travis, a young woman came into the shop to get a flower tattoo. She was wearing a sweatshirt with the name of a nearby college on it, and it appeared to be her first tattoo. A couple of minutes after my interview with Travis ended, a maintenance truck pulled up outside of the shop, and an older man in coveralls got out and came into the parlor. The young woman then called out to the man and moved over to hug him, and I heard her greet him as her father. They then went to look at the stencil that the artist had created for her daffodil tattoo, and the father was asking his daughter if she wanted the tattoo to be that size and if she was sure on the placement as well as the colors that she wanted her tattoo to have. It became clear that this father had come to support his daughter during her first tattoo appointment. It reminded me of the experience that I had when getting my first tattoo and how both of my parents and older sister attended the appointment with me, and they too were asking if I was sure about the size of the tattoo, the colors that I was going to use, and double-checking the placement after the stencil was placed. As this section demonstrates, tattooing can become a family-centered affair and thus can be used to help strengthen kinship ties between people.

Being humans mean that death is a part of life, and it is something that everyone will be faced with. Facing the death of kin though is often a painful and dreaded experience that is accompanied by grief. As theories and views about grief and loss have changed throughout time, so have ideas regarding the bonds that people share with the deceased. This includes the concept of continuing bonds, which are described as being the "...relationships that individuals, communities, and cultures maintain with those who

have died” (Cadell et al. 2022, 133). Thus, there has been some tattoo researchers who have suggested that memorial tattoos are an example of these continuing bonds, and that they allow for people to grieve their loved ones as well as find healing through the ability to carry reminders of their loved ones with them (Davidson 2016).

When asked about her favorite tattoo, one tattoo enthusiast, Karoline, explained that she has tattoos that are representative of her mother, who passed away in 2001 and of her father, who passed away in 2014. For her mother, she shared that she has a tattoo of a pair of haircutting shears where the handles come together at the top in the shape of a skull because her mother used to cut hair when she was very young. She also mentioned having a tattoo of her mother’s handwriting that says ‘follow your dreams, wherever they may lead’ as well as a tattoo that says ‘love me, again.’ Karoline went on to describe how that particular tattoo is special to her because she got it as a matching one with her brother. When asked about the story behind it, Karoline explained how her brother and her had decided to get a tattoo of their mother’s handwriting, and that he had brought a card with a sample of the handwriting to the tattoo shop. After inspecting it closer, Karoline had noticed that on the inside of the card, she had written a message followed by “love mom,” but when she flipped the card over, she found that her mom had continued to write more and signed it “love me, again.” Upon seeing this, Karoline knew she wanted to have those words tattooed on her, so her brother got “love mom” while she has “love me, again.” To represent her father, Karoline has a sugar skull tattooed with a big handlebar mustache because she had always loved her dad’s mustache. After describing her memorial tattoos to me, Karoline stated

“...My mother and I were extremely close, so losing her was very difficult. And so, it’s just like, a lot of these things have been very therapeutic, to be able to look at it and just think about her and conversations. And I smile, you know, it makes me happy. And same thing when I look at the one that I have for my dad, you know, it just makes me happy to look at that and think about my dad. And you know, people comment on it, like ‘oh a sugar skull?’ And I’m like ‘yeah it’s for my dad!’ and you know, explain who he was and the things he was into. And that’s going to keep them relevant. Keeps them around.”

Memorial tattoos were also mentioned by tattoo enthusiast Tina when I asked about her favorite tattoo (see figure 5.9). While she could not choose just one, she did roll up her sleeve to show me a tattoo on her forearm of a cardinal sitting on a branch alongside the words “Good luck on your journey to realize your dreams. I love you and I am here for you. PawPaw.” She explained that this was one of her favorite tattoos because of what it means to her. Tina’s from Alabama, and she went on to say that in the South, cardinals represent a loved one. She was very close to her grandfather, and on the morning that he passed away, she saw a cardinal at her front door. When displaying her tattoo, Tina clarified that it is one of her favorite pieces to show other people because the words are her grandfather’s handwriting that she got from a card he had written for her. Tina then shared that in the future, she would love to get a tattoo of a hummingbird in memory of her grandmother because they were her grandmother’s favorite. With her tattoo, Tina expressed that it is a symbol of her love that she had for her grandfather, and

that the tattoo allows her to keep his memory close, especially when she has the chance to share the piece with others.

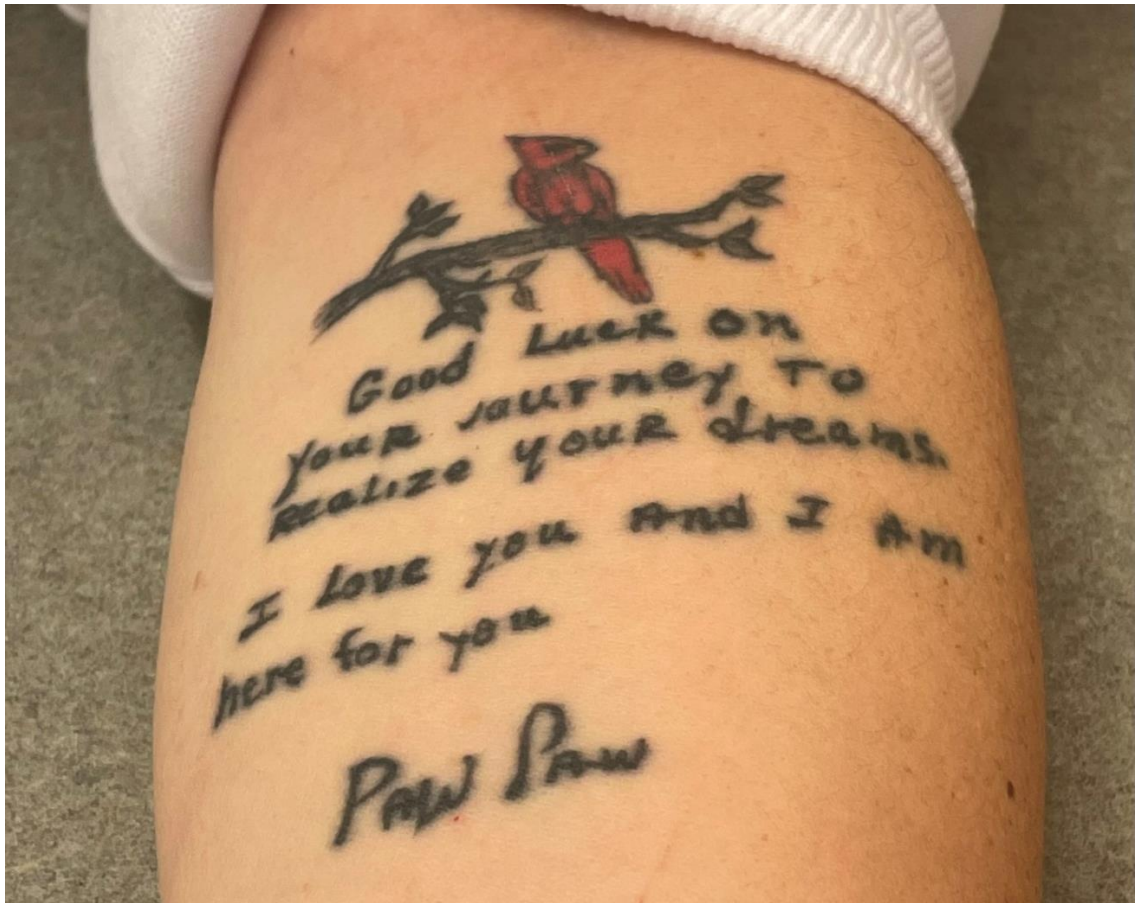


Figure 5.9: Tina's tattoo dedicated to her grandfather (photographed by Delanee Taylor)

For some people, they may also choose to use tattooing as a tool to aid them through the grieving process when they lose their companion animal and to represent the kinship that they felt for their pet (Hill 2020). While speaking to Mason about his tattoos, he explained that when his dog passed away, he was going to originally have a portrait of his dog done as a way to remember his canine friend. Instead, he chose to get a tattoo of the purple rubber hippo toy that his dog always loved to play with. Mason then went on

to explain that as a tattoo artist, he prefers to design commemorative tattoos that are representative of who the client's kin was and that remind them about the loved one that rather than just doing a portrait that captures their visual likeness.

Clearly, tattoos are used in a variety of ways to express bonds of kinship. Not only do these permanent pieces of artwork allow for people to visually display the relationships that they have with their close friends and family, but they also allow for them to maintain connections with those who have passed on, including both humans and animals. Additionally, it was often these kinship-related tattoos that were chosen as being the interviewees' favorite piece, and they were described as having meaning or significance to the participants. Thus, the theme of kinship is important to explore when discussing tattooing because it has continued to be a motivating factor with respect to the reasons why people decide to have certain designs permanently inked into their skin.

5.2.2: Wear it Loud and Wear it Proud!

In the literature review, identity was established as being a crucial theory within this research. Part of a person's identity includes the way that they perceive themselves, which is also known as self-image. The ways in which we perceive ourselves are developed through free determination as people make choices that allow them to differentiate themselves from one another in order to develop a unique personality (Golubovic 2011, 25-28). Additionally, it has been proposed by tattoo researcher Michael Rees that in Western societies specifically, personal identity has become focused on the body because of rampant consumer culture, and that as people are continuing to receive encouragement to construct their identities through their physical forms, there will be

more interactions with “nonmainstream body modifications” such as tattoos (Rees 2021, 95-96). As this theme will demonstrate, tattoos can be vital to someone’s identity tattoos as they allow for people to express themselves freely and authentically as well as allow cultivate unique appearances which can result in increased self-esteem and confidence.

One of the questions that was asked during the interviews was whether the participants felt as though their tattoos had an impact on their sense of identity. When I asked Amy, who has many minimalist tattoos in black ink, for her thoughts on this, she exclaimed

“I definitely think that they have impacted my identity because when I was younger, I was like ‘Oh yeah, I think I’ll probably end with tattoos,’ but never in a million years would I have expected to get this kind of style and artwork of tattoos! And I used to only think I would get meaningful ones. But since then and getting older and actually just kind of saying f*ck it and getting the tattoos that I think look cool at the time and make me happy at the time, I think [they] boost my confidence significantly.”

I followed up by inquiring about whether she intends to convey anything through her tattoos, and while she did not have a specific answer to this question, she did explain that ultimately, her goal is to look as “bad*ss” as she possibly can. Amy also mentioned that she enjoys the attention that she gains as a result of others admiring her tattoos, and that she views it as a compliment because she specifically tries to choose designs that are unique and different. For Amy, tattoos are an important part of how she expresses herself. She explained that when it comes to other forms of her appearance, such as through

clothing and makeup, there are limitations to the appearance that she can cultivate. Additionally, Amy likes to dye her hair different colors, but from her perspective, there are only so many colors that her hair can be. During my interview with Amy, she made it clear that she cares about cultivating a physical appearance that is distinctive, meaning that she will go out of her way to avoid popular trends for fashion, makeup looks, and hairstyles. With body modifications however, she viewed them as being more limitless and therefore a great option for achieving a unique appearance, which is why she utilizes her tattoos as a way to express her individuality.

The impact of tattooing on one's self-expression was also discussed by tattoo artist Jake, who like Amy, felt that it would be easier for someone to express themselves through their ink because they can choose any design that they want and place them on their body. If the tattoos are visible to others, then they may be able to understand something about the tattooed person or learn about an aspect of them. For some tattooed people, they value tattoos for their ability to offer a broader range of self-expression because people can be highly specific regarding what image they have on their body.

When speaking with Johanna, another heavily inked woman, about her first tattoo, she described how at 18 years old, she walked into a tattoo shop and decided that she would get a Capricorn design inked onto her skin. I asked her if she remembered what the motivation or rationale was behind that first tattoo, and Johanna replied "I mean, I was 18, you know, and so I was very much into astrology back then, and I still am. But like, that's what I felt like represented myself the most at that moment in time, you know, just like Oh my Zodiac sign, Let's do it! It's big and bold on my hipbone" Later on, I asked

Johanna if she felt that her tattoos have impacted her sense of identity, and she immediately agreed, explaining that she has found herself to be more comfortable in her skin the more covered it is by ink. She expressed similar sentiments while talking about how tattoos have affected her sense of self-expression saying that "...I can express myself more with tattoos. I grew up as an only child, so I was quiet and shy, and like, this was my way to really, like, promote myself...this is who I am...getting tattooed is one of my hobbies honestly, that is what I love to do in my spare time."

During the fieldwork process, I was lucky enough to speak with Jay, an amazing tattoo artist who had been working in the industry for the past eight years. While talking about their first tattoo, which was a pokéball from the Pokémon franchise, they explained that their reason for choosing that particular design was because "I have always been a dork. And there's a long story around my transition of confidence through obsessing over my own nerdness. But it was kind of a symbol of that. Of accepting myself for who I am and not trying to fit into other people's bubbles" Additionally, when we talked about their tattoos and whether they intend to convey anything with them, they shared that they do not anymore but that they used to be hyper obsessed with the ways in which they appeared to other people and how they were perceived, which included the first few tattoos that they had gotten. Now though, they do not care what others think and instead focus on having tattoos that are fun and make them feel happy. For Jay, their tattoos are an especially important part of their life because they suffer from depersonalization disorder. They went on to clarify that

“There’s a lot of times where I can’t recognize them on reflection, and it’s really alarming you know, it’ll cause me to disassociate really hard. And tattoos have been the only thing to help with that because I can actually recognize my own reflection for the first time, because I know that each one is like ‘Okay I remember getting that’ So instead of being terrified of looking at my own reflection if I’m having a dissociative episode, I can sit in front of a mirror and focus on my tattoos, and it grounds me again. So, I want more, I just want them everywhere. And that’s really my driving force now.”

Jay also mentioned that tattoos have impacted their sense of identity in a positive way, and that they have helped them a lot because

“It changes the way that other people see you in surprising ways. Like, I don’t think people expect me to be such a fucking dork and a socially awkward weirdo when they look at me...people associate tattoos with ‘Oh you’re a badass” and “Oh that’s so cool’ and I’m like nope, I’m afraid of everything. So, they give me self-confidence that I would otherwise be dramatically lacking, and it made me like my body for the first time. Instead of looking in the mirror and seeing my flaws, I see things that I love, which is huge.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by Karoline when asked about her the reasoning behind her first tattoo. She stated that she always admired people who were their authentic selves, did what they wanted with their bodies, and were not afraid of what other people may think about the way that they present themselves. Karoline also shared that her tattoos can be major confidence boosters for her when people come up to

her and compliment the details and colors within her ink. She explained to me that although the messages and meanings behind her tattoos are not meant to be understood by others, she is still open to speaking about her permanent artwork with those who inquire about them. This has been especially useful for her when it comes to opening up and engaging with strangers because as a self-described extroverted introvert, she is often not comfortable speaking with new people, but if they ask her about her tattoos, Karoline finds that she is able to engage with them and come out of her shell. Her tattoos function as an icebreaker in these situations, and they have helped her to become more confident when she is surrounded by unfamiliar people. Additionally, when we were chatting about how her tattoos have impacted her sense of identity, Karoline explained

“Lately...I look at my arm and I see all of it and I’m just like, if I saw this one on someone else, I would be in love with it and think that was the coolest thing in the world. I would just be in awe of that person. And I look at that, and I’m like ‘That’s me.’ And I should be in awe of myself, of everything I’ve accomplished and what I’ve done in my life, you know? I don’t think enough people think about themselves in that way because like, I’ve become the cool person I’ve always admired in other people...It’s like I’m that person now, and I’m like ‘oh my god.’”

Evidently, tattoos have the ability to allow people to shape the way that an individual views themselves as well as influence the way that they are perceived by others. This is especially important when considering how self-image can impact people’s behaviors and the ways in which they move through social spaces. As these interviewees

mentioned, their tattoos allow them to feel confident and comfortable in their own skin, and that they are living as their true, authentic selves, which is something that can be difficult to achieve, especially in societies where physical forms are often emphasizes as being part of one's identity. Tattoos are also another outlet through which individuals have the ability to express themselves, whether that be by displaying aspects of their personality, or choosing designs that they feel will help them to stand out from others. Thus, this theme is significant because it ultimately displays how tattoos can have a beneficial impact on people's identity and allow them to move through life while feeling positively about their body.

5.2.3: The Artistry of Tattooing

During the interview process, it became clear that there are a variety of motivations that exist behind people's tattoos. While there are some who choose certain designs because the imagery holds special meanings for them, there were a number of interviewees who expressed that they valued visually pleasing tattoos. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, aesthetic is a term that can be used to refer to something that is "pleasing in appearance or effect" and often describes something that is deemed to be beautiful (Merriam-Webster 2023). Throughout the interview process, aesthetics was often mentioned by the participants when describing the various factors that they consider when deciding to get a new tattoo. For some of the interviewees, they have worked to cultivate a specific style or look, and they use their tattoos as a way to help them maintain that appearance. At the same time, multiple interviewees explained that as their ink collections have grown, they have come to value designs that they find to be entertaining

and bring them a sense of joy. While every person has their own tattoo journey, it is still important to consider the ways in which people's motivations behind their body modifications can change over time and to explore the different values that people are expressing through their ink.

When adding tattoos to their collection, there are many people who begin to settle into a specific style of tattoos that they enjoy and pursue a certain aesthetic from the beginning of their tattoo journey. With Johanna, she explained that her tattoos are all traditional in style, and that different parts of her body have specific tattoo designs. She showed me how one of her legs is covered in colorful tattoos, while the other leg is tattooed in black, gray, and red. Meanwhile, the ink on her upper body is exclusively done in black and gray work. When I asked if these tattoos are representative of a chosen aesthetic, she confirmed that she chose these specific styles because she wanted tattoos that would hold up over time. There is a popular saying in the tattoo community of "bold will hold," meaning that thick, bold designs, linework, and colors will allow for a tattoo to maintain its original look as people age and as the tattoos are exposed to elements that can cause ink to breakdown or spread. I then asked Johanna about the factors that she considers when she decides to get a new tattoo, and she explained that at this point in her tattoo journey, she looks for pieces that will fill empty spaces and will match the aesthetic she has curated. Similar sentiments were expressed by tattoo artist Josh, who I was able to interview while attending the Seattle Tattoo Expo. While talking about his own tattoos, Josh mentioned that he tries to maintain a specific aesthetic when choosing his next designs. He explained that he enjoys fantasy and is a big fan of the Lord of the Rings, so

many of his tattoos have fantasy elements to them while also maintaining a traditional style.

In the methodology chapter, it was mentioned that I had been given the opportunity to conduct an interview with an apprentice at one of the shops that I was visiting. Morgan was the first person that I saw when entering the tattoo parlor, and I immediately noticed that she had beautiful black and grey tattoos on one of her arms with imagery from famous paintings, such as Venus from “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli (see figure 5.10). When I had the chance to ask her about her tattoos, she explained that she had designed them herself, and that they were tattooed on her by her mentors. I asked her specifically about her first tattoo that she had drawn of a mountain scene, and it was explained that the design was drawn up to capture the aesthetic of what she wants to look like and who she wants to be (see figure 5.11). She then showed me the sleeve that was a work in progress and explained that she loved art nouveau and baroque art styles because they are visually pleasing and there is a sense of elegance to the way in which the images are drawn. Thus, Morgan aims to capture these styles within her tattoo designs, and her goal is to cover her body in designs that are visually pleasing to her.



Figure 5.10 (left): Morgan's tattoo of Venus and Figure 5.11 (right): Morgan's first tattoo (photographed by Delanee Taylor)

There are also some people who choose to pursue tattoos that are more about being aesthetically pleasing after they have gotten tattoos that are highly significant to them. Speaking with tattoo artist Jay, they explained that when they first started to get tattooed, they cared about their tattoos having meaning, but as they have added to their collection, their focus has shifted to collecting designs that they like. They laughed, saying

“It drives my husband crazy because I’ll get tattoos just cause I think they’re funny and he does not understand because to him, they have to be meaningful...I have Vin Diesel on the back of my thighs because I thought it would be hilarious. And I’ve got ‘hold on to your butts’ underneath my butt cheeks and that’s my...Jurassic Park tattoo...And he’s so confused by that. I’m like, they make me

happy. So yeah, it doesn't get any deeper than that with me anymore...They're just silly most of the time. As long as they make me happy, I'm good."

They also mentioned that because they are now in a phase where they just want to collect cool tattoos, they like to get pieces from other tattoo artists that they admire. They explained that they asked the artists to pick an animal and to design them a surprise tattoo. Similar sentiments were expressed by Tina, who explained that she mainly considers the meaning behind her pieces, and that they all hold significance to her. Now that she has multiple tattoos though, she wants to pursue designs that are aesthetically pleasing to her. For example, she shared that she is interested in getting a large tattoo of a tiger crawling down her back simply because she likes tigers and thinks that it would look pretty on her body.

As people continue to gain tattoos, they often develop an appreciation for their artist and want to support them. Talking with Amy about her newest tattoo, which was an abstract rose on the back of her arm, I learned that she had gotten it at a tattoo convention. When I asked what the motivation was behind that specific piece, she said that there was a lack of rationale, and explained that she and some friends in New York had decided to attend a tattoo convention. While there, she ran into the artist that she had been getting tattoos from, and she liked the flash pieces that he had created for event. She decided that she would get another tattoo to support his work and show her appreciation for his artistry. Similar sentiments were expressed by Johanna, who shared that her newest tattoo, a traditional rose and dagger, was done at the Seattle Tattoo Expo a few days prior to the interview (see figure 5.12). She explained that it was done by an artist

who had done a majority of the tattoos that she had on arms before he moved to Arizona. When she found out that he was going to be attending the Expo, Johanna knew that she wanted to get another tattoo from him and was grateful that she had the opportunity to get an one more piece from an artist whose work she admires. In fact, she had not even known what designs he was going to have available and had been told that she could come and choose whichever flash piece she wanted.



Figure 5.12: Johanna's tattoo from the Seattle Tattoo Expo (photographed by Delanee Taylor)

During the interviews that I conducted with tattoo artists, I also learned that many of them like to get tattooed by fellow artists in order to support one another as well as show appreciation for each other's talents. For example, when talking with tattoo artist Travis about his newest tattoo, which was the character Sylvester from the Looney Tunes

and Merrie Melodies cartoons chain smoking cigarettes, he shared that besides thinking it would be a funny and cool design, he mainly wanted to get a tattoo from his coworker who was moving soon (see figure 5.13). He then went on to say that as he gets more tattoos and has limited spaces left for new ink,

“...I want to get tattooed by people that I like and respect, that I’m friends with, just to have something from them. But I think it’s really really cool when tattooers want me to tattoo them. Like I’ve always thought that was awesome. So, you know, it’s like ‘Oh wow, you want a tattoo from me! Really?’ So...I’ve tattooed my coworkers a few times and some of my former coworkers. So like, if you know someone out there that I’ve worked with before, there’s a possibility that I’ve tattooed them.”

For some interviewee tattoo artists like Travis, they have an appreciation for their fellow artists’ work, so they like to give them more freedom to create designs that are unique to their style rather than dictate what the tattoo will look like. I also had the opportunity to interview Anthony, who has been a tattoo artist in Tacoma for the past thirty years. When I spoke with him about his newest tattoo, he shared that he had traded tattoos with his friend in Olympia who he had worked with for 9 years. He then showed me the traditional rose that was done on his knee (see figure 5.14). On his friend, he had tattooed a traditional American style eagle. He explained that now, he is mainly getting tattooed by his artist friends, and that he lets them do what they want for the designs.



Figure 5.13 (left): Travis' tattoo and Figure 5.14 (right): Anthony's tattoo (photographed by Delanee Taylor)

Tattooists supporting each other's artistic expressions and creativity was easily seen during the Seattle Tattoo Convention. At the expo, each tattoo shop or private studio was given their own booth where they could set up their tattooing equipment and display the flash pieces that were available for the day. Many of the booths also had additional items such as prints, flash sheets, paintings, jewelry, stickers, clothing items, and other knick-knacks that eventgoers could purchase to support the tattoo artists. While walking through the rows of booths, I noticed that some of the artists would leave their booths with one of their prints or paintings, and they would approach artists at another booth and ask if they wanted to trade pieces. I saw this occur several times, the other artists would always agree and then offer their own artwork in exchange as well as sometimes offering each other business cards or stickers that had their shop logos on them. There were also tattoo artists who would walk around the expo if they were not currently with clients to visit with artists at other booths or to purchase additional items. These interactions really stood out as being examples of how the tattoo community and artists come together to show support for one another's artistry.

Similar feelings regarding the appreciation of their friends' artistry were expressed during my interview with tattoo artist Mason about his favorite tattoo. Besides the micro-portrait of his son, Mason explained that his other favorite tattoo is his thigh piece that he had done by one of his friends. The tattoo includes a pit viper, a skull, and a large chrysanthemum. When asked about the reasonings behind the design, Mason said that he got the tattoo simply because it looked cool. He went on to say that at this point in his life, he is interested in getting tattoos from artists whose work he admires, and that he is looking to fill the spaces he has left with designs that he finds to be visually intriguing rather than ones that are full of personal meaning or have a backstory behind them. With regards to the tattoos that Mason has created for others, he shared

“It’s really cool to be able to do artwork on people that trust you that much...So when I draw something and put it up for grabs and somebody wants it so much that they want to put it on them, like pay me to put my art on them, that’s pretty special. That’s cool but also, it’s cool to be able to help people, you know, cover scars and stuff like that. Or do these very meaningful pieces, that’s a rad part of our job too.”

During my interview with artist Jay, they explained that although they could not pinpoint a reason as to why they originally decided to get tattoos, they love the art form itself because it is different from other forms of art. Jay talked about how they are always working on new crafts and exploring various forms of art, and they said that while they could spend hours of their time painting something, once it is hung up somewhere, it is often forgot about. If the artwork is physically on them though, they remember it, and

they become attached to the artwork in a way that they cannot with other forms of art.

When I asked if those feelings are similar when they are designing pieces for their clients, they said

“Yeah, I get really excited. I mean there’s some things I don’t get excited about because some stuff is overdone and lame...But I still genuinely love giving someone a tattoo. It doesn’t matter what the subject matter is...seeing people stoked about the tattoo on them means so much to me.”

Through these excerpts, it becomes clear that artists like Mason and Jay are passionate about their careers, and that they find joy in creating tattoos that bring happiness to their clients. At the same time, these quotes also display how tattoo artists are appreciative of when their clients have trust in their tattooers artistry and allow them to have more creative freedom with their designs.

As these excerpts show, there are some people who chose specific designs or styles of tattoos that will allow them to cultivate a specific image. Others want to have tattoos that they find to be visually appealing or entertaining. There are also people who do not care about the specifics of their tattoo design and would rather allow their artist to express their creativity and trust that their artists will produce a piece that both the artist and client will appreciate. This is especially true when artists are looking to get inked by their friends and want them to have the opportunity to demonstrate their artistry by creating something that they enjoy. Ultimately, this theme demonstrates how one does not need to have to have specific meanings or stories behind their tattoos to make them

significant, and that they can simply have an appreciation for the artistry of this form of body modification.

5.2.4: Stickin' It to the Man and Moving Against the Norms

In the second and third chapters of this thesis, it was noted how the art of tattooing has not always been viewed in a positive light, and in some culture or communities, inked individuals are seen as being people who engage with deviant behavior and purposefully push against societal expectations (Sanders and Vial 2008, DeMello 2000, Atkinson 2003). While much of the stigma attached to tattooing has been removed as a result of its acceptance among mainstream society, there are still people who hold negative perceptions of tattooing. Some still associate tattoos with social outcast groups or criminality, while others may reject tattooing for religious reasons (Kosut 2000). There are certain places where tattooing is more widely accepted than in others, which can contribute to the feeling that there is still a sense of stigma attached to the practice of tattooing. Awareness of how tattoos have been viewed in the past can lead tattooed individuals to feeling worried about how they may be perceived, and as a result, some may choose to hide their ink in fear of how other people may react (DeMello 2000, Thompson 2015).

For those who grew up in situations where tattooing is not widely accepted, they may come to see tattooing as an act of defiance against the norms of their community, and view tattoos as an act of rebellion. This was the case for tattoo enthusiast Johanna, who shared that she had grown up in a very religious and conservative household with parents that were highly against tattoos. When she turned 18, Johanna had decided that

she would get her first tattoo in secret, and she made sure that it was done in a place that she could easily hide until she moved out of her parent's house. When I asked her what influenced her decision to become tattooed, she shared that

“...growing up in the house I did, and it being so strict and conservative, I just was always kind of a rebel child and, you know, I was just drawn to those things like piercings and tattoos, and I wanted to get them as soon as I turned 18. And I did, you know, and my parents were not happy about it, but that made me want it even more.”

Tattoo artist Travis mentioned being in a similar situation, and explained how his parents were conservative and had negative perceptions towards tattooing. Thus, Travis was never aware of tattoos as a child and did not think about becoming an inked adult. This changed however when his friend decided to get one, and Travis began to view tattoos as being something that was cool, new, and looked down upon by his family. He got his first ink at 21 as a small act of rebellion, and because he was the first person in his immediate family to have tattoos, when everyone found out that he had permanently modified his body, it was treated as a big deal.

While chatting with tattoo enthusiast Tina about her decision to get inked, she too had gotten tattoos as an act of defiance against her parents who were not accepting of tattoos. She shared that as a teenager, she was never a troublemaker because she played sports and could not risk doing anything bad that would get her kicked off the team.

Thus, getting a tattoo was something rebellious Tina could do without facing repercussions. When I asked if her parents were still against her body modifications, Tina

explained that while her mother has now come around to tattoos, her father still disapproves of them, which she suspects could be a result of his upbringings in the South where people tend to be more conservative and associate tattooing with people who are “white trash.” Tina also mentioned that she had hid her first tattoo from her family because she was scared to tell them about what she had done, and her plan was to just hide the tattoo for as long as she could. For her graduation though, her family decided to go on a cruise, and her new ink was revealed when she wore her swimsuit. Upon seeing the tattoo, Tina’s father was not happy, but looking back at that day, Tina said that she finds the story to be funny, especially because now she just sends her mom a text or picture when she gets a new tattoo or piercing.

As mentioned above, there are tattooed people who are concerned about the stigma that was attached to the practice in the past and worry that they may be faced with similar negative perceptions if their tattoos are highly visible. Thus, they may purposefully choose to have tattoos that are easily concealed by clothing. There are others, however, who want to lean into the feeling of being a social outcast and do not worry about the views of others. While chatting with Travis about his work as a tattoo artist, he mentioned that when younger people come to the shop looking to get inked in highly visible locations such as hands, the neck, and the face, he is often hesitant and will first speak to the potential client about how the perception that others may have of them could change. He explained that sometimes, these particular clients are seeking that sense of disapproval and want to be viewed as an “outsider” of popular society. When someone comes into the shop looking to be tattooed in these locations, Travis says that he checks

first to see if they are heavily tattooed, and if he looks at them and cannot immediately see ink, then he likely will turn them away because they do not know what it is like to live as a heavily tattooed person and they do not have a full understanding of how others' perceptions of them could impact the ways in which they feel. He then explained that in the shop where he works, these kinds of tattoos are called job stoppers, and that even though tattoos have become more accepted by mainstream society, he will still tell people to not tattoo their hands, neck, or face.

Additionally, when talking with Karoline about her tattoos, she shared that when she started to get inked, there was no one else in her family who had tattoos. With a conservative upbringing, she noted that her mother had been worried at first that people in their community would associate Karoline with groups such as biker gangs if she started getting tattoos, which is why she waited until she was in her twenties and living on her own before getting her first ink. She also went on to say that her first few tattoos were small and easily concealable because she worked in a hospital after moving to Tacoma, Washington, and that visible tattoos were not allowed. Karoline then shared a story about how she worked in a medical records department at a hospital in the late 1990s, and that she had a manager who was strict about the dress code and appearance of the employees, including with the appearance of tattoos. Once the dress code was re-evaluated though and the rules became more relaxed, Karoline felt that it was safe for her to show her tattoos, and that she could tattoo areas of her body that she previously had left blank to avoid getting in trouble at work.

During the interviews that I conducted with both tattoo artists and tattoo enthusiasts, it was mentioned multiple times that there are certain places throughout the country where tattooing seems to be more prevalent. For example, when chatting with tattoo artist Anthony about shifts in the acceptance of tattoos over time, he said

“it’s going to change. It’s already changing. I mean, go to Costco, there’s people that work there that are covered, or any of the fast-food restaurants. You see places that they’ve changed policy, Starbucks changed their policy. People are allowed to have visible tattoos. Now medical industry people are starting to have visible tattoos.”

Here, Anthony is describing tattooing within the city of Tacoma, but did go on to mention that

“...it’s interesting to me like, I will travel places and I think the place that you see the most tattoos are really Western Washington. People are tattooed here. They are heavily tattooed all the time. Anywhere you go, the grocery store, I mean you see people that are tattooed. California, Western California is kind of similar. But then you get to some places like Idaho, parts of Idaho, Utah, Eastern Washington, it’s not prevalent. And I think the Midwest is probably another place that’s probably like that as well.”

Additionally, tattoo artist Jake revealed that he had recently taken a trip to San Diego, California and said that he had seen almost no people with tattoos, which was a weird experience for him given that many people in Tacoma are tattooed. He described it as

being surreal, and that it felt like he had traveled back twenty years to a time when tattoos were not mainstream.

In the literature review chapter, I mentioned how William Ryan Force referenced the works of sociologist Erving Goffman and Howie Becker to discuss how stigmatized careers can impact social interactions as well as cause tension in family relationships (Force 2020). Similar sentiments were expressed by a few of the artists that I had the opportunity to interview. For example, tattoo artist Mason mentioned that he had liked the idea of being a tattooist when he was a teenager, but both of his parents disapproved of the idea. He even shared that his stepmom had been convinced that all people with tattoos were part of motorcycle gangs. Luckily, Mason's family supports his career now and are proud of the art that he creates. This was also the case for Travis, who as mentioned above, had grown up in a family where tattooing was not viewed in a positive light. When I asked how his family feels about them now, Travis said that he has tattooed all of siblings, and that his parents have become more accepting of them. His grandfather, however, still does not approve of Travis' career even though he has been working in the tattoo industry for fifteen years.

Another artist who struggled to get their parents approval is Jay, who has worked in the tattoo industry for nine years now and owns their own shop. Jay revealed that they had grown up in very conservative and Christian household where tattoos were not approved of. They described how they could not talk about tattoos at home, and that their mom would "freak the f*ck out" anytime Jay was caught watching shows like *Miami Ink*. They said that although they had always been interested in tattoos, it took them a while to

gather up the courage to go and get one. When their mother found out what Jay had done, she cried and made Jay promise her that it would be the only tattoo they would ever get. This led me to ask about how they became a tattoo artist in the first place, and Jay explained that

“I was having kind of a mental crisis. I got my associate degree. I was planning on going to UW for paleontology...my dad always pushed me to go to college, and he said that there's only careers in like math and science, and that art's just a waste of time. So, he would help me pay for college if I went for anything but art. But art was the only thing I was ever interested in. So, as I was setting up for an internship in the museum there and meeting other paleontologists, I realized that they're all miserable and chemistry makes me miserable. And I was going to have to do six years of upper chemistry. And then I had a breakdown and dropped out of school, and I was getting my first large tattoo around the same time, and I just fell in love with it...so I started apprenticing maybe six months after that.”

When I asked if their parents were more supportive of their career now, Jay said that their dad is really proud of them for owning a tattoo shop, but that “...it took probably five years before I heard the words ‘I’m proud of you’ come out of his mouth.” With their mom, Jay says that she still does not understand Jay’s passion for tattooing, but that she is at least supportive of what they are doing. Later during the interview, I asked if anyone else in their family had tattoos since becoming an artist, and Jay shared with me that their dad had eventually gotten a tattoo from them. However, it was not a positive experience, with Jay sharing

“...he hates it...he made it very clear. Like ‘Jay, I never wanted a tattoo. I still don’t want a tattoo. I’m getting a tattoo because you’re doing the tattoo. But I still don’t want it on me. And this is your fault.’ Like cool dad, this is fun.”

Overall, this theme displays how contemporary tattooing is still perceived by some as being acts of rebellion either against their upbringings, their community, or society as a whole. These examples show there are still stigmas that are attached to tattooing as a result of the artform’s history. Although there are some people who seek out tattoos for the purposes of wanting to feel as if they are outsiders and social outcasts, others may feel concerned that their ink could cause them to be viewed in an unfavorable light, especially when it comes to their own family members. Additionally, these excerpts demonstrate how choosing the path of becoming a tattoo artist may be isolating for those whose family members disapprove of their career path, which can lead to strained relationships. Within this theme, it was revealed that many tattoo artists feel that there have been shifts within the past few years towards widespread acceptance of tattoos, and that they are no longer as stigmatized as they used to be. While this is true, it is crucial that one considers how the acceptance of tattooed people is not universal and how that may have an impact on tattooed individuals as they move through spaces where their ink is seen as an act of deviancy.

5.2.5: The Tattoo Community

It was noted in the methodology chapter of this thesis that one of the questions I asked the interviewees was whether they feel that the tattoo community exists, and if so, where can it be found. This question was asked in order to explore how the increase in

acceptance towards tattooing has impacted the tattoo community. In the literature review chapter, one of the books that was discussed was Margo DeMello's "Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community." DeMello stated that her own perceptions of what it means to be part of the tattoo community shifted during her research, and that the tattoo community is not just limited to its existence within tattoo shops and instead "...occurs whenever tattooed people talk about themselves, about each other, and to each other" (DeMello 2000, 18). Thus, this research question aimed to establish how tattooed people view and interact with the contemporary tattoo community, and how these perspectives change depending on whether someone is simply a tattoo fanatic or a tattoo artist.

After tattoo enthusiast Amy said that she believes there is a tattoo community, I asked her where she finds the community existing, and she explained that besides surrounding herself with people who are also interested in tattooing,

"...I think it's a lot of the social media presence that I actively seek out because I know that like, before I got any tattoos, I wasn't really following any artists or anything. It wasn't until I started actually doing it that I like, infiltrated the community, I guess, and I started following more people and seeing more tattoo stuff on social media. I feel like that's a big, big place for it all...communities thrive online."

Johanna also agreed that there is a tattoo community, saying

“People kind of bond over what they do, and putting their art on somebody’s body for the rest of their lives is huge so yeah, I definitely feel there is a strong community, maybe different cities you know, it’s not as popular or as big, but out here in the Pacific Northwest and Seattle/Tacoma, like almost everyone you meet has a tattoo of some kind, and you really bond together right?”

Tina shared a similar perspective, explaining that if she sees someone with tattoos, she feels that she has a better chance of getting along with them because her first thought is that they have something in common. She also mentioned that she would feel more comfortable approaching a person who has visible tattoos instead of someone in a suit and that appears super clean-cut, and that she would make friends easier with the tattooed person because they are more relatable to her. When asked if she feels more comfortable engaging with tattooed people, Karoline expressed similar sentiments as Tina, explaining

“If I see people with tattoos, I tend to gravitate more to them, I feel kind of like a kinship. Kind of like we’re part of the same tribe kind of thing. Because it’s like they’ve done something that they wanted to do... I’m just like, you know what other people may think of your tattoos and you still have it. And I’m just like dude, I’m down with that, let’s talk.”

For tattooed people that are not artists, there is a clear belief in the existence of the tattoo community, and that the community is based on tattooed people interacting with one another outside of tattoo parlors and tattoo-focused events. With these interviewees, one can see that heavily tattooed people feel that their ink allows them to

make connections with one another because they have something in common and are more relatable than people who do not have any ink. However, this is not a perspective that is shared by all tattooed people.

While talking with tattoo artist Anthony who has been tattooing for 30 years about his perspective of the tattoo community, he explained that he does not think the tattoo community exists much anymore because so many people are tattooed. He elaborated, clarifying that

“It used to be a community and a culture, but before social media. And before it being so acceptable. And now it’s so acceptable, and social media is putting it out there. I mean, all these celebrities are tattooed. So many people are tattooed now that it’s just commonplace. So, it’s not this subculture, you know, you’re not a weirdo anymore. Now you’re more weird if you’re not tattooed. So, it’s almost the opposite of what it was...you’re not going to have any kind of subculture for heavily tattooed people.”

When I asked if this was good, he replied

“It’s probably great for business because people are going to get tattooed, people that maybe didn’t get tattooed because they were worried about not getting a job are going to get tattooed because it doesn’t matter anymore...most people have tattoos, so you’re not really this, I guess you’re not an outcast anymore.”

Artist Travis, who has been tattooing for 15 years, expressed slightly different views in saying that there is a tattoo community as well as smaller communities within the broader

group. He mentioned that part of how this happens with regards to tattooers is associated with who they were taught by and who else they were apprenticing with. This caused difficulties for Travis who explained that as he was becoming a tattooer, he tried to learn what he could from others, however he was not always accepted by other tattoo artists because he was not taught by any well-known artist in Tacoma or within the tattoo community. Thus, he feels that he has never been friends with many tattooers unless he works with them directly.

Something important that Travis noted is that how artists view the tattoo community changes because some of them have been tattooing for much longer than he has, meaning that some of them were tattooing at times where body modification was not accepted by mainstream society and there was a greater sense of unity between artists as well as people who are heavily tattooed. As the following excerpts display, there is a division when it comes to the perceptions of the tattoo community by tattoo artists who have been in the industry for a significant period of time versus newer artists who started working when tattooing became more popular.

When talking with Chris, who is a notable tattoo artist from Anaheim, California that was visiting the Seattle Tattoo Expo, he shared that he has

“Been in the business of tattooing 67 years now, and I started when I was 15 years old tattooing out of my car. And so, I’m still, I’m 82 years old now and I’m still getting around. So, I still care about the business and keeping it going. It’s changed so much. Who can say where it’s going from here, I mean, it blew my mind years ago. Still blows my mind. I don’t know how it could get any bigger.”

I asked him if he felt that there was still a tattoo community today, and he answered

“Well, I know there is one, but it’s hard to recognize. I mean, there’s so many aspects to this business that I don’t even know how to answer that. I don’t know what to say even, it’s just so multi-faceted, who can even describe anything about where it’s headed. Everyday technology in this business changes continuously. And people’s concepts about how they do business and so forth. So many of these guys are like ‘Oh yea, I’ve got a private studio now’ and I think ‘Oh bullshit.’ We can’t all have private studios. What the hell’s wrong with these people. And so, I don’t even get that, all these people that have these egos, that are so uncontainable now. And I like to say we’re all turds in the tattoo toilet. You know, we’re all the same...And it’s just amazing that they’re so elitist, that’s how I think of them you know. I mean...if you’re a tattooer, you ought to be glad you’re at anywhere in this building, no matter where they tell you your booth is...I don’t relate to 90% of them that are in this building anymore because they’re so standoffish or you know, they got that whole thing going on where they don’t even let walk-ins come in anymore...I tell a lot of these girls and guys that operate so privately to at least leave the door open where you can walk in, even if only to hear ‘Oh, we only work my appointment. Well at least you’re in the door and you can tell somebody something instead of seeing a sign or a locked door...I tell all of them, you know, presence is half of it. Just being there is half of it. If they’re not there, for d*mn sure nothing’s going to happen.”

For Chris, being part of the tattoo community as an artist means that you are making sure you and your shop or business are accessible to other members of the tattoo community, and that you are not closing yourself off from the rest of the community and the culture.

Later on, I had the chance to speak with Chris' business partner John, whose been working in the tattoo industry for 48 years. He expressed similar sentiments about the current tattoo industry, saying

“Yeah, it's changed so much from when we started it was like, you know, there was no tattoo convention and no tattoo magazines, there was no social media, no computers, so much of the stuff that we just totally take for granted did not exist. Just didn't exist. Not to mention, you know, in 1975, there might have been 300 tattoo shops in the whole country in 1975. Now there's 300 tattoo shops, probably in Orange County, California. So, it's gotten way more popular than we could have ever imagined.”

When I asked if he views these changes as being positive or negative, John replied

“Yes, both. Both. It's definitely positive because you know, we always wanted tattooing to be more acceptable and respectable. We didn't want it to be where it's so common now. It's like, you know, nail spas, where there seems to be one on every corner. Yeah, you know, it's not supposed to be like that, you know, we wanted it of course to be more popular. And more acceptable, and so forth. But not to where, you know, now it's overkill...a lot of what we think was the magic of tattooing is no longer a mystery...But anyway, you know, the level of artwork

in tattooing it's astounding. That's the best stuff that's ever been done ever. It's amazing the level of artistry that's out there. But there's still though, even with that, there's still a lot of issues."

I then asked him if he felt that there was still a tattoo community, and he agreed, explaining that

"Yeah of course there is. But it's changed. It's just changed. Everything's changed. The world has changed, you know. So why would it not affect tattooing as well? You know, cause it has, it's just you know, things that we just never thought would happen have, things we thought would happen didn't. It's just, it's just crazy. But I mean sure, there's still, it's just modified. Just like everything else, you know, nothing's the same as it was, and it will never be. You know, the good old days are gone, and what we have is what we have. You know, I mean, I'm still enjoying it, I still go to these things. Hanging out and enjoying myself you know But, I ah, I definitely miss the old days, and I always will. But you know, again, it was like, I missed a lot of things from the old days. I didn't know the old days were the good old days when I was part of it."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Jake, who began tattooing in the mid-nineties. He explained that the tattoo community is more open now and is less than a subculture than it used to be as tattoos have become more accepted. When I asked him if he viewed this as being positive or negative for the tattoo community, Jake described it as being positive because tattoos are more accepted and there is less judgement, which means that people with tattoos can pursue more career options than they could a couple

of decades ago. The negative side however is that the industry has become saturated. He explained that on the street where his shop is located, there are ten other shops, and that there are now 30 shops in the city rather than just a few. As a result, he feels that there is no longer a tight-knit tattoo community. Like artist Travis, he did mention that there are old school artists who came up in a tight underground community where they hold on to that feeling, which means that they stay to themselves and do not always embrace new or younger artists. For Jake, he tries to be more of a progressive artist where he is always looking for ways that the industry can advance. Thus, he does not involve himself much with the tattoo community because he does not value the old school mindset where there are strict “right and wrong ways” to be a tattoo artist.

Jay, who has been tattooing for nine years now, expressed similar thoughts when asked about the tattoo community. From their perspective,

“The tattoo community is garbage, I guess that’s my answer. If it exists, it sucks. I definitely have a lot of friends in the industry that are also tattooers, but I know way more tattoo artists that are complete assholes and that I just don’t want to be around, or it’s really like, fake and facetious. It’s just a lot of talking shit behind your back. So, I think a lot of us give up on befriending other tattoo artists because we’ve been burned a lot by other tattoo artists. Um so yeah, I don’t know about like, the collectors’ side, like people that have a lot of tattoos. I’m sure that that community exists out there, but I’ve never been a part of it, so I’m not sure... Yeah and so there’s a lot of us that are trying to change that, and I’m glad that it’s dying out. But it’s slow, like since I bought the shop, I’ve been trying to

change that, trying to train people in nontoxic ways and I'm getting backlash from the other artists that are here because they're frustrated that the apprentices now have it easier. Like they're mad at me because I'm not treating my apprentices like sh*t, which is so backwards to me.”

Earlier on in the interview, Jay had mentioned that there is a lot of abuse towards apprentices in the tattoo industry, and that there is the prevailing idea that someone must be torn down in order to later be built up. They also noted that as a biological female who identifies as non-binary, they were treated much worse than fellow apprentices who were heterosexual males. Thus, they view the tattoo artist community as being harmful due to the way that it excludes tattooists who are gender queer.

Dean, who has been a tattoo artist since 2009, also agreed that the tattoo community exists yet has undergone major changes within the past few years. He shared

“Yeah...For better or worse it's become less elitist. Which I think is really good.... With that old school mentality...you had to do things a certain way, you had to fit within this framework to be considered part of that community. Now, with the prevalence of tattooing and the acceptance of it, that community is so fucking big that you have like multiple layers of it even up to like, you know, smaller more tightly knit groups. But you know, back in the day...you'd go to a bar and there'd be like a table with people who are all heavily tattooed and nobody else. And now everybody blends in. So yeah, I feel like it's diminished quite a bit in that sense, there isn't as much of that baseline community because

it's so much more accepted. You're not having to group together to feel less ostracized."

With regards to the tattoo community, it is clear that there are conflicting opinions regarding whether the community exists and whose voices are being prioritized. Among tattoo enthusiasts, there was agreement that the community does exist because people bond over having something in common. For non-artists, having ink makes someone more relatable and approachable, meaning that the tattoo community for heavily inked people is about engaging with one another over this form of body modification that they share, whether that be through online communications or in person. Looking at the viewpoints of tattoo artists, there is a divide between those who are old school artists and those who are new school artists. For old school artists, many of them were working in the industry when tattoos were not viewed positively by mainstream society. Thus, they have different ideas regarding how one should run their business, and some of them feel that new tattoo artists are elitists who do not want to engage with the older generation of tattooists. For new school artists who have been working during a time where there is less judgement towards the industry, they feel that there is now a lack of inclusivity in the industry, and that the old school mentality of doing their jobs in specific ways can be limiting to their creativity and artistry. Additionally, there are newer artists who feel that it is the old school artists that are elitists and that they do not embrace the younger generation of tattooists because they do not fit into the previous mold of what it meant to be a tattoo artist. As one can see, the tattoo community is a complicated space where there are a variety of viewpoints regarding what the community is and who is part of it.

Thus, it is imperative that voices of multiple tattooed people are included in order to understand how the community has changed as a result of advances in technology as well as to learn about how the community will continue to evolve as more artists and tattooed people are entering this space.

5.2.6: Social Media: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

In the previous section, it was mentioned that the tattoo industry always experiences changes when there are advancements in technology. The most recent of these shifts occurred as a result of the expansion of social media. In addition to shaping the way that members of the tattoo community interact with one another, social media has also impacted how tattoo artists perform their jobs. As this theme will demonstrate, these social platforms have led to some improvements for both artists and their clients. At the same time, social media has also had unforeseen consequences for the tattoo industry that in turn affect tattooists as well as enthusiasts, leading to differences in opinion regarding the overall usefulness of these digital spaces.

One of the benefits of social media is that it can allow members of a community to find as well as interact with one another. This is true for Amy, who mentioned that she primarily utilizes her social media platforms as a way to connect with the tattoo community. When I asked her if she follows a lot of tattoo accounts or seeks out tattoo-related content, she said

“I definitely do. Especially since having an artist that I go to a lot of the time...I kind of follow their mutual followers or other artists that they know, especially

since going to things like the convention. I got a bunch of business cards, and I was starting to follow a lot of other people. And then there's also a convention coming up that I want to go to, so I've already looked up artists that are going to be showing up there. And I follow them, a lot of them. And then my Pinterest is all tattoos. That's everything on Pinterest and that's where I go for all tattoo ideas and inspiration."

Amy also revealed that sometimes, she will find old school tattoo shops near where she lives that she has never heard of. Sometimes though, she will see other shops that she knows because of seeing their profiles online. She went on to share that "Internet presence is so important to me because I'll look up portfolios and profiles online before going in the shop, or I'll find this new shop... and they just have like a Facebook website, and I'm like hmm I don't love that. And then I'll move on." For tattoo enthusiasts like Amy, having a social media presence is critical because it allows people to gain a feeling for who the artist is or what the tattoo shop will be like before they visit in person, which will overall create a feeling of comfortability. This can be a highly important aspect of tattooing given that it is a physical and intimate act between tattooers and clients. Thus, having a weak social media presence can act as a deterrence, especially amongst younger generations that rely on social media platforms to gather information about artists and shops to decide if it is worth their time to visit a place in person.

Another major benefit that social media has had on the tattoo industry was mentioned by tattoo artist Anthony, who explained that before social media and the internet, the only way that artists could network was through conventions and visiting

other shops. Now though, tattoo artists can build their networks by following one another and interacting with each other's content. Additionally, when asked if social media has changed the way that he does his job, Anthony mentioned that it has, and that there have been both positive and negative effects on the tattoo industry as a result. On one hand, it allows people to educate themselves on the practice of tattooing, and they can learn how to identify quality shops and artists. On the other hand, however, having greater access to information can lead to some people assuming that they know more about tattooing than they actually do. For tattoo artists, this can be an issue because as artist Dean stated, "Tattooing is an industry where the customer is almost never right." Tattooing is a complicated artform due to the medium being used and how much variation there can be within human skin. If an artist is working with a client who thinks that they have more knowledge than they do, it can be frustrating for the artist to do their job and give the client a tattoo that they will like.

When I asked if it has become necessary for tattoo shops and artists to be involved with social media, Anthony replied

"I think you have to be involved on some level.... that being said, I think if you have a good reputation and you've been tattooing for a long time, you don't have to be involved in social media as much. If you're new to tattooing, you definitely have to use it as a tool. And I saw it with a guy that works here whose been tattooing for about five years, and he does so much stuff on social media. He books appointments, and he's busy because of social media. And without that self-promotion, he probably wouldn't be as busy as he is."

He also explained that part of the reason why he is not on social media as much as other tattooers is because he has been in the industry for a long time and has become established within the Tacoma community, which he described as being a word-of-mouth place. This means that many of his clients find him because he was recommended to them through his other clients. Since Anthony has been tattooing for 30 years and has already built his clientele in Tacoma, he does not need to rely on social media as a way to reach more people who may be interested in his work.

Anthony also mentioned that he thinks one of the draw backs of how much people are using social media to connect and communicate with one another is that they are losing the ability to communicate effectively with others in person, which is vital to tattooing given that it is a physical act that requires for there to be contact as well as communication between the artist and the client. Anthony continued on to explain that when there is lack of conversation between the tattooer and their client, then

“You might get a good tattoo, but you don’t get the personal connection with that person giving you your tattoo. And I think that’s a big part of getting tattooed. When you get tattooed by somebody there is definitely a transference of energy between two people. It’s an intimate thing.”

I also inquired as to the impacts of social media on the communication between artists and tattooists, and interestingly, artist Jake shared that he has seen an increase in the amount of communication that he receives through his social media accounts which he views as being beneficial, explaining that

“...back in days when people wanted a tattoo, you just walked into the shop and talked to whoever was available to talk to you, and that’s the way it was.

Nowadays, they get to be more selective because you might walk into a shop and maybe there’s an artist that you like, but they’re not the one available to talk. So, they’re not the one you’re going to end up working with. You know what I mean?

Nowadays, you just contact the artists directly and have direct dialogue with them...it makes things a lot easier.”

These perspectives are interesting because together, they display how social media has had both a positive and negative effect on the communication that occurs between tattooists and their clients.

Both of these viewpoints were further acknowledged by tattoo artist Dean. He revealed that one of the biggest benefits of social media in the tattoo industry is that it can be a useful tool for artists, especially those who are new the community since

“...some artists are able to work private studios now, they don’t have to be in a street shop. They don’t have to have this storefront to be able to operate because they can basically have their own identity entirely on social media so they can communicate with clientele entirely from that and be able to work at a location that isn’t easily accessible... You know, you can limit your social interaction to exactly how you want... You know, it’s a lot of benefits to that but yeah, it still like boils down to you have to have a really big space and communication when you work on someone’s body, there’s so many variables that you have to consider. Like you know, there’s web artists that are doing the entirety of their consultations

with like Facetime. Like entirely over social media before they even have them come in and look at the space that they're working with. For me, I need to see what I'm working on, you know, see how the body moves, and even their skin types...there's so many variables where like, you need to be in person for that, so you have to find that balance."

Dean also pointed out that as a result of his social media presence,

"...I have so many clients from out of state who have only seen my work online and come in to get tattooed from that. And I would never have that opportunity if I didn't have social media, you know what I mean? Especially if you're trying to an artist that guest spots and travels, you have to have that established."

One of the main impacts that social media has had on the tattoo industry is an increase in the amount of information that is available to the public about tattooing. While chatting with tattoo artist Mason, he mentioned that because of social media, people can learn how to tattoo without ever being an apprentice, and that they are expanding their level of artistry and creativity, which is drawing new artists to the industry because they are able to learn about new styles and techniques on their own. He even expressed that some of his personal favorite tattoo artists were not apprentices, and that they were able to teach themselves based on the materials that are available online. In the previous section, it was mentioned that the tattoo community has a history of being abusive towards apprentices. The ability to learn tattooing through social media could be especially appealing to new artists due to the fact that tattoo apprentices have not always treated well in the past, especially those who are not heterosexual males.

However, for other artists such as John, he views this as one of the reasons why social media is harmful to the tattoo community, explaining that

“If you watch a YouTube video or some other bullshit...unfortunately for somebody that’s really really artistic, they can pick up tattooing now thanks to all the shit, because of the level of equipment that you can buy and the instruction that is available out there. People can learn to tattoo without an apprenticeship and that’s terrible. That’s really terrible because no matter what you think and how good of an artist you are, everyone that tattoos should only tattoo with an apprenticeship. They should never attempt to do this without one because...this is something that looks much easier than it is. Did you ever see Liberace play the piano? I mean it literally looked like he was tickling the ivories because he was. But that took how many years of practice? Yeah, you go up there and tickle the ivories like that, and let’s see how that goes. Of course, it’s not going to work. So, with tattooing, a lot of it’s the same way. It looks deceptively easy in some cases, and it’s not. But you know, people don’t want to hear it. They want what they want. They don’t care.”

John also mentioned that there is an issue of people posting heavily edited images to their social media saying

“There’s a lot of unscrupulous artists out there that will photoshop their shit, and I remember when that was first being done. I didn’t know it was Photoshop. And I’m looking at someone’s stuff going ‘That’s one of the best tattoos I’ve ever seen!’ I don’t know how all that was done, especially without all the redness that

would be associated with a fresh tattoo. But there's no redness around the tattoo. The tattoo is completely saturated. It looks absolutely amazing. And I was just like, 'Well, I don't know how they did it, but it looks like they did.' And later on, I find out it's fake, and I never did think that 'That's fake, that's Photoshop.' I just thought 'Well, now the ability is beyond mine' because I don't know how they did that. I don't know what kind of ink they used, I don't know what kind of needle configuration, what kind of machine they used. I got no idea, you know? And then to find out that son of a b*tch was fake. It was photoshopped, you know, and that really pissed me off....at least now I know that that is all bullsh*t."

As this excerpt demonstrates, one of the main downsides of the tattoo industry becoming involved with social media is that some artists will purposefully alter images of their work in order to promote the idea that their tattooing is better than it is. This is an issue because if people view these edited images online, they may develop an unrealistic idea regarding how their tattoo will look. One example of how this can occur comes from tattoo artist Jake, who explained

"There's a lot of unrealistic expectations because, you know, for example, let's say finger tattoos? Generally, they don't hold up real well. So people always say like 'Oh I've seen some guy who did this micro portrait on his finger.' But you're not seeing what it's going to look like in a year or two years or three years. I know what those tattoos look like in three years because I see people coming in here all the time that have had tattoos like that. And you know, six months down the road they look like crap. So, when all you see is the day it was done, that's the best it

will ever look. You're not even seeing what it looks like three weeks later. You know what I mean? So it can be misleading. But really, that's the error on the users' part for not thinking that through. It's either an error because they're new to tattooing and don't understand the process or it's an error because they didn't actually think about 'well of course they just posted it fresh, who knows what it'll look like healed? You know, your hands encounter everything, the belt on your pants, pockets when they go in there. I mean, of course it's a high traffic area, so it's not ideal in the same way as a tattoo on your inner bicep and a ribcage. They're just not thinking those things.'"

Through this example about finger tattoos, Jake illustrated how people without certain knowledge regarding tattoos may become misled by the altered images that they see online, which creates a complicated scenario that calls into question the responsibility of social media participants as well as the integrity of tattoo artists. Ultimately though, this example displays how the incorporation of social media in the tattoo industry is not always beneficial, especially for clients.

Josh, who is another tattoo artist that I met at the Seattle Tattoo Expo, stated that he hates social media and it's the worst part of his job. However, he finds the free advertising to be highly useful. I then asked how he uses his social media as a tattoo artist, and he explained that he mostly uses it as an online portfolio given how easily updatable it is. Additionally, in preparation for the expo, Josh revealed that he would hashtag his posts with Seattle so that his posts would be picked up by the Instagram algorithm and then be shown to people who have interacted with content related to the

expo or people who enjoy tattoo-related content and are located near Seattle. As this example displays, social media can be a powerful promotional tool for artists who are open to utilizing the platforms. This was further demonstrated to me during the Seattle Tattoo Expo. While walking the floor of the convention, something I noticed was that behind each of the booth's at the expo, many of the shops or artists who were attending the event had some kind of sign or poster at the back of their station. In addition to having the artist's or shop's name on these signs, many of them also included handles to Instagram accounts as well as Facebook pages. There were also a few artists who had wooden signs sitting on the table that said "follow me" with their Instagram handle as well as business cards that shared the artist's social media information, which further indicated how vital social media platforms can be when it comes to the promotion of tattoo artists' work.

Tattoo artist Jay expressed strong opinions about social media and the tattoo industry. They stated

"I don't see the negative side of social media with tattooing at all. I think the more exposure we can get, the better. It's so much more accepted. I mean, I tattoo so many teachers now, like some of my old high schools teachers. I'm like, I never saw a fucking tattoo when I was in fucking high school. And it's awesome, yeah...So I say the more publicity that it can get that normalizes it, the better. Like it'll never be too much for me."

They also shared that now, around 90% of their clients are contacting them through Instagram whereas they used to get clients through word of mouth. When I asked if they had any ideas regarding why this drastically changed, Jay explained

“I think people just started using Instagram for that reason. Just looking for artists in their area instead of asking their friends. They’re like, ‘Oh why would I waste my time when I can just search on Instagram for ones close to me?’ So yeah...with social media, it’s mostly for posting tattoo photos more than anything. And it was great during the Covid shutdown to keep people updated like ‘We’re still closed’ or ‘We’ll be opening soon.’ And so it’s great to be able to reach your clients quickly, which is awesome.”

They then expressed that the only part they do not enjoy about social media is that there are messaging options on every platform, which means that their accounts often get an overwhelming amount of messages being sent to them by prospective clients. Jay also expressed that social media can be a useful tool for artists when they are trying to narrow down what their clients are looking for in terms of style or design for their tattoos, rather than having a lot of guesswork while they create the tattoo. Something interesting that they did share with me was that

“Personally, I f*cking hate social media. It’s the bane of my existence and I wish I never had to interact with it. As a businessperson? Holy sh*t is it valuable. I take the good with the bad there. It’s really valuable for finding new clients and establishing your own clientele. It would be nearly impossible without it, I think. Or at least a lot f*cking slower.”

Overall, it is undeniable that social media has impacted the tattoo industry. However, opinions regarding whether that impact tends to be positive or negative differ across the tattoo community. For some people, they view social media as having positive impacts on the tattoo community given that it allows for members of the community to connect with and support one another while also providing opportunities for newer artists to share their work. Social media has also been beneficial for the tattoo industry in that it has increased the visibility of the community, which can be useful in further dispelling the stigma and negative perceptions that some people still hold regarding tattooing. Others tend to focus on the negative effects that social media has had on the industry. This includes the editing of photographs and use of filters on images of tattoos that are shared to social media sites, which can lead to people gaining unrealistic expectations regarding how tattoos look and how ink changes over time. Additionally, there are conflicting views on topics such as how social media has affected the communication that occurs between artists and clients as well as the use of social media and the internet to learn how to tattoo without going through an apprenticeship. Interestingly, something that all these artists agreed upon however, is that they do not like social media, yet the use of it has become a necessary evil in order to survive in the industry. As one can see, the intersection between tattooing and social media is complex and will continue to evolve as these platforms expand.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1: Contextualizing and Answering the Research Questions

This thesis consisted of two main research questions followed by secondary research goals. The first of these inquiries focused on examining how social media has changed the practice of tattooing. There was also the goal of establishing how social media is being utilized when people seek out tattoo-related content. With regards the importance of social media, it was found that when the survey participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Social media is important to your life,” almost half of the respondents selected that they somewhat agreed while another 15.89% indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement. Additionally, when asked if they were part of any groups or communities through their social media accounts, more than half of the survey respondents indicated that they were, with multiple participants going on to share that they are part of various tattoo-based communities. When looking at these survey responses, they reveal that social media is an important tool that people use to connect with members of cultures or communities that they are either already part of or are looking to become participants in, which includes the tattoo culture and community.

These findings were also supported by the information that was collected from the semi-structured interviews. Tattoo enthusiast Ammy shared that besides surrounding herself with people who are interested in tattooing, she actively seeks out the tattoo

community and tattoo-related content through her social media accounts. During my interviews with tattoo artists Jay and Dean, both confirmed that they thought social media has impacted the ways they conduct their businesses, and that they view social media as a reliable tool that has aided them in building a larger clientele base. Meanwhile, Oregon-based tattoo artist Josh explained that social media allowed him to promote his work before coming to the Seattle Tattoo Expo and helped him to reach people in western Washington who would be interested in getting a piece of permanent art from him. As the online survey results displayed, a variety of social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest, and Facebook are being used by current and future members of the tattoo community in order to view tattoo-related content. When asked what type of content they search for, many respondents answered that they were looking for design inspiration for their next tattoos, while others wanted to explore different tattoo styles. Many participants also indicated that they use social media to look at the profiles of tattoo artists, who often use their accounts as an online portfolio where they can display their work to current and potential clients. Others noted that they like to look for entertaining content, with some leaving comments that said they like to look at “bad/cringey tattoos” or watch videos that are created by YouTubers who focus on tattoos content. As one can see, social media platforms are being used in a variety of ways by current and future members of the tattoo community, and the increased use of social media has clearly had an impact on the practice of tattooing as a whole.

The second research question that this thesis aimed to answer was how tattoos are used to express the differing facets of a person’s identity. This study also sought to

explore how the meanings and significance of one's tattoos change as they add more ink to their body. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, most of the tattoo enthusiasts and artists indicated that they felt their tattoos are a vital part of their identity, whether it was because the designs represented an important part of their life or personality, or because they acted as a unique form of self-expression that they could use to cultivate a certain appearance. Even interviewees such as tattoo artist Anthony who stated that he did not view his tattoos as being a fundamental part of his identity still mentioned that it would be very strange to look down at his skin and not see any ink. This indicated that tattoos at the very least can be an important part of one's appearance, which can also be a significant aspect of their identity. The impact of tattoos on one's identity was also supported by the responses of the survey respondents when they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "tattoos are important to your sense of identity." For this question, I only looked at the responses from the 164 respondents who indicated that they had at least one tattoo and found that 40.24% of these participants strongly agreed with the statement, while another 39.02% somewhat agreed with the idea that tattoos are important to their sense of identity. Additionally, when questioned about what influenced their decision to become inked, one tattooed respondent shared that as a transgender and genderfluid person, they have felt that they do not have control over their own body because their sex did not match their gender. Thus, tattoos have become part of their personal journey with gender expression because their ink allows for them to have a sense of control and ownership over their body and their appearance.

During the analysis of the interview transcripts, it became clear that every tattooed person is on their own journey of being inked, and that tattoos are tools that allow them to express different aspects of themselves. For some, they had put substantial amounts of thought into the design and meaning behind their first few tattoos, and that over time, they instead come to value designs that simply made them laugh, or designs that they felt were aesthetically pleasing and would be beautiful pieces of art to have inked into their skin. Multiple artists also expressed that some of their tattoos were created by fellow tattooers, and that they wanted to have their friend's work tattooed on them as a way to support one another's artistry and creativity. For others, they expressed that all their tattoos are important in some way, whether they were to honor a loved one who passed or to represent a friendship, or because they allowed the tattooed person to look at them and remember who they were at the time they received that piece, or reminiscent about the experience that they had while getting the tattoo. As the thematic analysis displayed, tattoos that do not have specific meanings or reasonings are still impactful in that they can aid tattooed people in cultivating specific appearances, which can increase their confidence and sense of self-esteem. Even though the motivations behind people's tattoos appear to vary from person to person, it is clear that all tattoos are important in some way, and that they contribute to the cultivation of a person's identity, whether that be the way that they perceive themselves, or the ways in which they want to be perceived by others.

In the literature review chapter, I noted how the theories of identity, social identity, and semiotics are important to consider when discussing the topic of tattooing.

Anthropologist Zagorka Golubovic described identity as being where a person belongs in society. This includes the ways in which people express themselves as well as how they both integrate themselves in groups and differentiate themselves from others. With regards to individual identity, she notes that they are developed when someone exercises their free choices to explore their own traits, characteristics, and needs. Social identity on the other hand focuses on specifying the circumstances and situations in which people think of themselves as individuals or as members of a group. Additionally, utilizing the theory of semiotics when viewing tattoos allows one to interpret tattoos as visible, permanent signs on the body that can be studied in order to understand the reasonings and meanings behind peoples' tattoos (Rose 2016). When combining semiotics with identity theory and social identity theory, one can see how people utilize body modification to explore themselves as well as express different aspects of their identity to others. As the interviews displayed, some people are using their tattoos as a way to convey something about their identity while others are using their ink as a way to cultivate an identity. It also became clear during these interviews that being heavily tattooed and engaging with tattoo-related content or attending tattoo-focused events leads to people identifying themselves as members of the tattoo community, with some artists even noting that they have been correctly labeled as a tattooer solely because of their appearance. Hence, tattoos have the ability to both shape the way in which tattooed people view themselves as well as influence the way in which others perceive them.

Furthermore, these theories are important to consider when talking about social media due to the fact that one's identity can be influenced by what they are seeing around

them and what they are interacting with on a daily basis. When analyzing the survey results, it was discovered that 54.67% of the 214 respondents estimated that they spent between one and three hours per day using social media platforms, while another 38.32% of the survey participants admitted that they likely engaged in these digital spaces for four to six hours a day. In the third chapter of this thesis, it was discussed how one's identity is impacted by socio-cultural contexts and factors, which can include the interactions that people have with one another. As social media marketing expert Tracy Tuten stated, social media is defined as being "...the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility" (Tuten 2021). Thus, social media is centered around the importance of connection and participation, so as people are spending more time on these platforms, they can become influenced by the content as well as the communities that they actively engaging with. As the paragraphs above have shown, tattoos can have a major influence on someone's identity, and people are seeking out social media platforms as a place to explore tattoo-related content and participate in the tattoo community, which can in turn affect the decisions that they make about their tattoos. This could include the style or design that they decide to pursue, or inspiration for how one can express a certain aspect of their identity or an important part of their life through their ink. Thus, it is important that social media is studied when discussing the tattoo industry, culture, and community because it is an influential force that affects the choices people are making in their offline lives with regards to their choices to pursue this form of body modification.

6.2: From an Underground Culture and Community to an Industry: The Effects of Social Media on the World of Tattooing

As the previous chapter displayed, social media has become an essential tool for both tattoo enthusiasts and artists. For the enthusiasts, it allowed them to seek out new tattoo artists and shops that they would like to visit, or they could view images of others' ink as a way to help them plan out their next design. Others were interested in viewing examples of certain tattoo styles to decide if they would like to pursue a similar aesthetic with their body art. Some used these digital spaces as a way to connect with other members of the tattoo community, which could be especially beneficial for those who live in areas where tattoos are still not entirely seen as acceptable by the surrounding society. When it comes to artists, most of them view social media as being a powerful marketing tool that allows them to share their work more easily with others. For other tattooers, social media has become a valuable means of communication between them and their clients. There were also artists who noted that social media has been beneficial because overall, it has increased the visibility of tattoos, which has led to a greater acceptance of the practice by mainstream society.

Tattoo artists such as Chris described how there have been changes in tattoo culture and the tattoo community because of advancements in technology, with the most recent of these changes occurring with the rise of social media. With this shift however, it became clear that there are new conflicting opinions regarding the impacts of social media on the art of tattooing. For example, there was concern expressed by older tattoo artists that there are newer artists who are posting heavily edited photographs of their

work to their social media websites, which can lead to non-artists developing unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved with the medium of skin. Additionally, those who are interested in becoming tattoo artists are able to find resources through the internet and social media, rather than through obtaining an apprenticeship. As a result, the industry is more saturated than ever, with new artists and shops seeming to appear every day.

When examining all the data that was collected for this research, it became clear that there has been a shift in the practice of tattooing. What was previously a tightknit, underground culture and community has become more of a business and an industry where anyone can participate, either by becoming an artist or getting a tattoo. Thus, there is tension between older and newer artists as well as older and newer members of the tattoo community. During my conversations with the older tattoo artists, a few of them expressed that in the past, the tattoo community was centered around the idea that being tattooed meant being an outcast, a rebel, and a social deviant. Tattooed people during these times often bonded together, which led to a tattoo culture where the goal was to be different from others and embrace the fact that their appearances identified them as people who defy social norms and expectations. As a result of this, they feel that the increase of tattooed people means that there is no longer an authentic tattoo culture or community. While they wanted tattooing to become more respected as a practice and an artform, they feel a sense of loss because there is no longer the feeling of being part of an authentic and exclusive community that embraced the concept of being social outcasts.

This tension further stems from the fact that there are further disagreements regarding whether these changes are actually damaging the tattoo culture and community. As artists such as Jay have pointed out, changes within the tattoo culture and community have led to an increase in inclusivity and accessibility, which overall creates a greater acceptance of tattooing as well as provides more opportunities for those who are interested in the practice to engage with the culture and community. Other artists also felt that the recent changes allowed for artists to have more freedom because they are no longer bound to ideas of the “right and wrong ways to tattoo.” As a result, they can explore more with their techniques and designs, which pushes the artistry and creativity forward and improves the artform as a whole.

Hence, the conflict that has emerged is ultimately the result of the tattoo culture and community expanding to becoming an industry. As tattoos continue to become more popular, artists and shop owners must consider how they can use tools such as social media to grow their businesses. After examining the responses of both the survey respondents and the interviewees who are tattoo enthusiasts, it became apparent that the tattoo community and culture does still exist, however it is thriving in a different setting now. Instead of being confined to tattoo shops and conventions, tattooed people are also able to engage with one another through digital spaces, and they keep the culture alive by continuing to participate in tattoo-focused events and by engaging with other members of the community to share knowledge as well as their appreciation of the artform with one another.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Anthropology has long been interested in the study of tattoos, whether that be examining how they are used by various cultural groups to communicate group membership or discussing how deviancy, rebellion, and stigma have caused tattoos to be viewed negatively by some members of society. This thesis was created out of my personal use of social media to consume tattoo-related content and conversations that I had with friends about how they seemed to care less about their tattoos having deep or significant meanings as they continued to modify their bodies. Thus, I sought to undertake a research project that would explore how social media has impacted the practice of tattooing and how these platforms are being utilized when people decide to seek out tattoo-related content. At the same time, this thesis was also designed to be able to examine how tattoos are used to express the various facets of a person's identity as well as how the meanings and significance behind someone's tattoos may change as they continue to add more ink to their bodies. To carry out this research, I utilized a theoretical framework that consisted of semiotics, identity theory, and social identity theory, which shaped how I conducted my research as well as influenced the way in which I interpreted the findings of the data.

The survey results indicated that social media has become an increasingly important force both within the tattoo industry and the lives of internet users.

In addition to displaying that more than half of the survey respondents utilize these sites as a way to engage with different groups and communities, the results also revealed that although 61.68% of the participants either somewhat disagreed or strongly agreed with the statement that social media was important to their identity, 62.62% of the participants noted that they either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that that social media has become an important part of their life. This data also displayed how social media has become a significant tool for those who are already tattooed and those who are looking to become tattooed, with many people using these platforms to search for new design inspirations as well as examine various tattoo styles and view the profiles of various tattoo artists. Even though the findings of this survey demonstrated how social media platforms are being used for different purposes with regards to viewing tattoo-related content, this data is valuable because it shows how social media has become an important influential force over the tattoo industry and community.

As the thematic analysis and participant observations demonstrated, tattoos are powerful signs on one's body that can be examined to learn about how tattoos may be indicative of one's identity. For some, their tattoos denote the close kinship bonds that they feel with the people in their life, or they are used to help keep loved ones' memories alive after they have passed. Other interviewees explained that their tattoos play an important role in building their sense of confidence and self-esteem, while others utilized their ink as a way to help them cultivate a specific identity that they wish to portray. Multiple interviewees shared that as they have added tattoos to their collections, they

began to care less about what the meanings are behind their tattoos and instead chose designs simply because they found them to be aesthetically pleasing or because they brought them a sense of joy. Some chose to get designs from certain artists because they trusted them and had a sense of appreciation for that person's artistry. The interviews also established how tattooing is often sought out as a way for someone to rebel against their parents, their upbringing, or their community, and that while much of the stigma surrounding tattoos has been removed, there are still people who hold negative perceptions of tattooing. Additionally, the interviews revealed that there are conflicting views regarding the current tattoo community. For non-artists, they expressed that they often feel a connection with other tattooed people and that one can engage with the tattoo community through social media as well as the interactions that they have with other tattooed people. For the artists, there were different views regarding whether the tattoo community currently exists as well as questions about whose voices have been prioritized within the community. Similarly, there were conflicting views regarding the impacts of social media on the tattoo industry and whether these platforms have changed the industry and the community for the better. There was agreement specifically amongst the artists however that it is no longer possible for one to work within the tattoo industry without being involved with social media, and that these sites have played an important role in increasing the visibility and acceptance of tattooing.

In the beginning of this thesis, it was mentioned that while there has been a significant amount of research that has been conducted on the art of tattooing, there has been little attention paid to how social media affects the tattoo industry. This is why

tattoo researchers such as William Ryan Force are calling for more studies to be done on the intersection of tattooing and social media. At the same time, there have been multiple research articles and books that have discussed at length the importance of meanings and narratives that exists behind people's tattoos. However, there is a gap in research when it comes to examining how the meanings and significance of one's tattoos may change as they add more ink to their body. This research is significant in that it fills these two gaps that have been identified in academic research on contemporary tattooing. Additionally, it was made clear by the interviewed tattoo artists technological advances always have some kind of impact on the tattoo industry. Given how rapidly social media has grown and the potential that it has to influence the billions of users who are creating, consuming, and sharing content on these platforms, it is vital that researchers who are interested in contemporary tattooing consider the ways in which the industry is being shaped by these sites as well as examine how this increased visibility of the tattoo industry may continue to destigmatize tattooing across the United States.

7.1: Future Directions for Research

Looking at potential directions that this research could take in the future, if tattoo researchers wanted to explore how advances in technology are shifting the tattoo community and industry, it may be beneficial to examine how other factors that could have an influence on the way in which people view and interact with digital spaces. For example, it would be interesting to see how one's socioeconomic status, gender, or age may have an influence over the ways in which people respond to questions regarding their views on tattoos and social media. If one were looking to conduct similar research

and was interested in speaking with tattoo artists, it may also be beneficial to consider the ethnicities of the tattoo artists who are being asked about how they view the changes that have occurred in the tattoo industries. I make this suggestion because a couple of the artists that I interviewed indicated that the old tattoo industry and community mainly consisted of white men. While it has been well documented by other researchers that gender has impacted the way in which artists have been treated by others in the industry, there has been little consideration of how one's ethnicity may affect how some tattooists are treated by their fellow artists and mentors.

Additionally, this thesis focused on how social media is impacting the tattoo industry within the United States, where tattooing has become much more accepted by mainstream society, and there is less judgment associated with having inked skin. There are still some countries however where tattooing is illegal under Sharia Law, such as in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and the United Arab Emirates (Jiang 2021). There are also countries where tattooing has been legalized, however the practice is still highly stigmatized. This is true in Japan, where people with tattoos may be banned from entering certain places as well as in South Korea, where to tattoo legally, artists must possess a medical license, or they can be fined up to \$40,000 or even face imprisonment if caught tattooing illegally (Van Hout 2023; Chung 2022). As many of the tattoo artists mentioned during the interviews, social media has been a useful tool for increasing the visibility of the tattoo community and decreasing societal judgment and stigma that has been placed on the practice. Hence, it may be interesting for future projects that focus on tattoo research to examine how the rise of social media may have impacted the tattoo industry

in these countries where body modifications are not accepted by mainstream society and are heavily stigmatized.

In the end, it is clear that tattooing is a unique and multifaceted form of art that deserves to be explored in depth in order to understand the various ways in which they can be used as tools of expression. As this thesis displayed, the tattoo industry continues to be influenced by advances in technology and is currently experiencing shifts as the influence and use of social media platforms grows. Therefore, it is vital that future research continues to consider the power that these networks can have on the topic of contemporary tattooing and how these changes can be displayed not only through the tattoo community but in the choices that individuals make when it comes to their decisions to permanently modify their bodies with ink.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Online Survey Questions

1. Consent Form Agreement
 - a. Yes, I have read and agree with this consent form
 - b. No, I do not agree with this consent form
2. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Man
 - b. Woman
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Other (Describe below)
 - e. Prefer not to say
3. How old are you?
 - a. 18-24
 - b. 25-34
 - c. 35-44
 - d. 45-54
 - e. 55-64
 - f. Above 64
4. Do you have any tattoos currently?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - i. If no and you are considering getting your first tattoo, the following questions pertain to your thought process about getting a tattoo.
5. How many tattoos do you have?
 - a. 0-5
 - b. 6-10
 - c. 11-15
 - d. 16-20
 - e. 21-25
 - f. 26-30
 - g. Above 31
6. How much money do you estimate you have spent on tattoos?
 - a. \$0-500
 - b. \$501-1000
 - c. \$1001-2000
 - d. +\$2001
7. How do you use social media?
 - a. Business/Work

- b. Entertainment
 - c. Stay up to date on news/current events
 - d. Stay in touch with friends and/or family
 - e. Other
8. What social media platforms do you use?
- a. Instagram
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Twitter
 - d. YouTube
 - e. Snapchat
 - f. Pinterest
 - g. Reddit
 - h. Other
9. Are you part of any communities or groups on the social media platforms that you use?
- a. Yes
 - i. If yes, please elaborate further if willing
 - b. No
10. How much time do you estimate that you spend daily on social media platforms?
- a. Less than one hour per day
 - b. 1-3 hours per day
 - c. 4-6 hours per day
 - d. 7-9 hours per day
 - e. More than 10 hours per day
11. What social media platforms have you used to view tattoo-related content?
(select all answers that apply)
- a. Instagram
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Twitter
 - d. YouTube
 - e. Snapchat
 - f. Pinterest
 - g. Reddit
 - h. Other
12. What are you looking at/for in tattoo-related content? (select all answers that apply)
- a. Artist Profiles
 - b. Viewing Shops
 - c. Design Inspiration
 - d. Style
 - e. Other

13. Agree or Disagree: Social media is important to your life.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
14. Agree or Disagree: Social media is important to your sense of identity.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
15. Agree or Disagree: Tattoos are important to your sense of identity and expression.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Somewhat Agree
 - c. Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - d. Somewhat Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
16. What has influenced you decision to get tattoos/What made you decide that you want them?
 - a. Social Media
 - b. Pop culture
 - c. Religious identity or background
 - d. Cultural Identity or background
 - e. Your peers have them
 - f. Convey a personal story or meaning
 - g. Aesthetically purposes
 - h. Other

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Who are you?
 - a. What do you do for a living?
2. How many tattoos do you have?
3. What was your first tattoo?
 - a. What was your motivation or rationale behind the tattoo?
 - b. Why did you decide to get your first tattoo?
4. What is your newest tattoo?
 - a. What was your motivation or rationale behind the tattoo?
 - b. Why did you decide to get your tattoo?
5. What is your favorite tattoo and why?
6. What do you think about when you decide to get a tattoo? (If not previously answered)
 - a. Meaning? Design? Aesthetic?
7. Do you intend to convey something with your tattoos?
8. Have tattoos impacted your sense of identity?
 - a. If so, how?
9. Have tattoos impacted your sense of self-expression?
 - a. If so, how?
10. What do you think influenced your decision to get tattoos?
11. Has the significance and meanings behind your tattoos changed as you have gotten more?
12. Do you think that there is a tattoo community?
 - a. If so, where does this community exist/where do you find it?
 - b. Follow up: How do you identify a culture, community, or scene? What do those words mean to you?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to mention or add before we end the interview?

Appendix C: Additional Figures from Survey Results

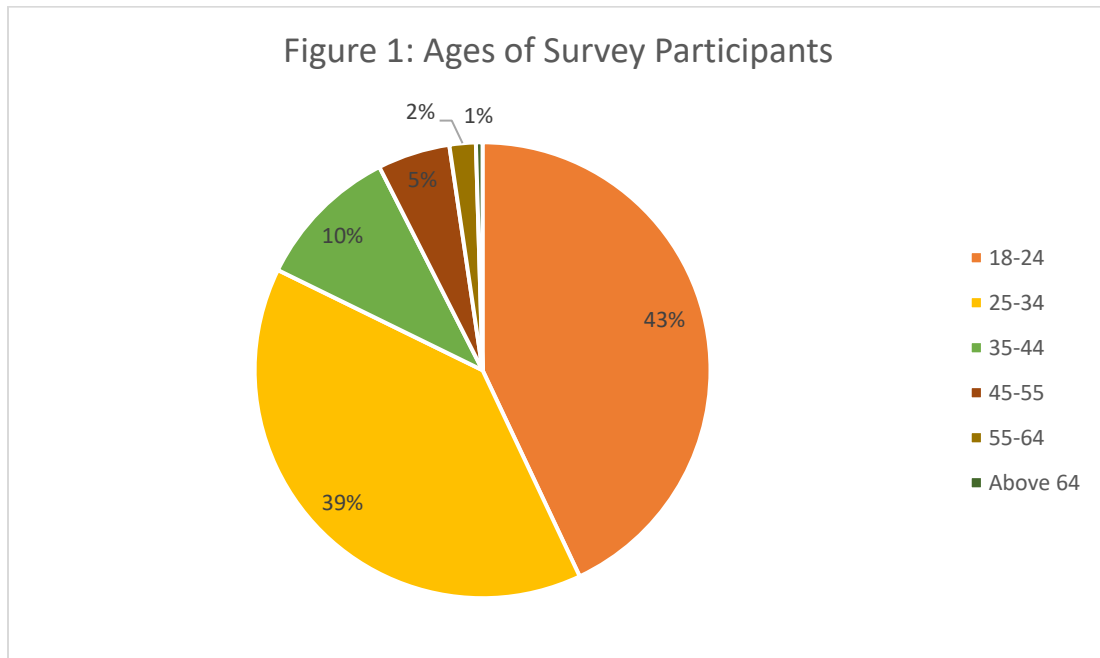


Figure 2: Number of Tattoos that Tattooed Participants Have

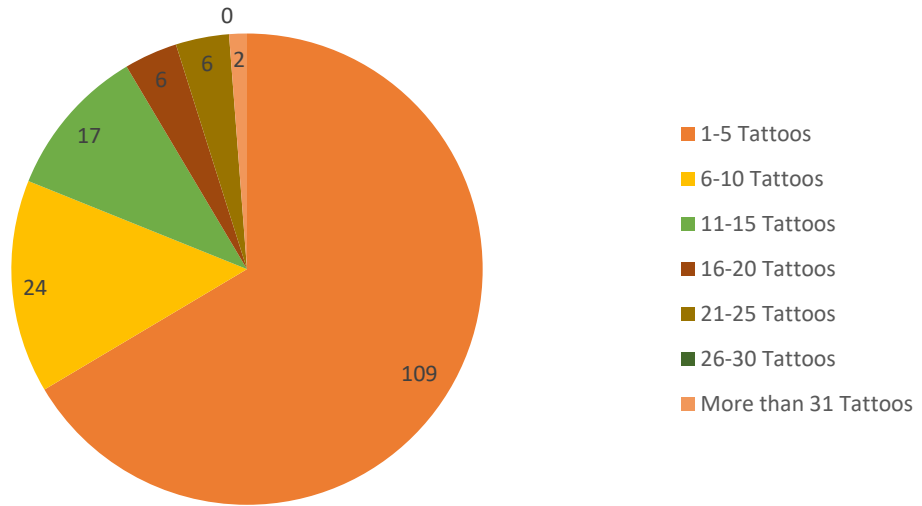


Figure 3: Count of Responses to Participants' Gender Identity and Whether They Have Tattoos

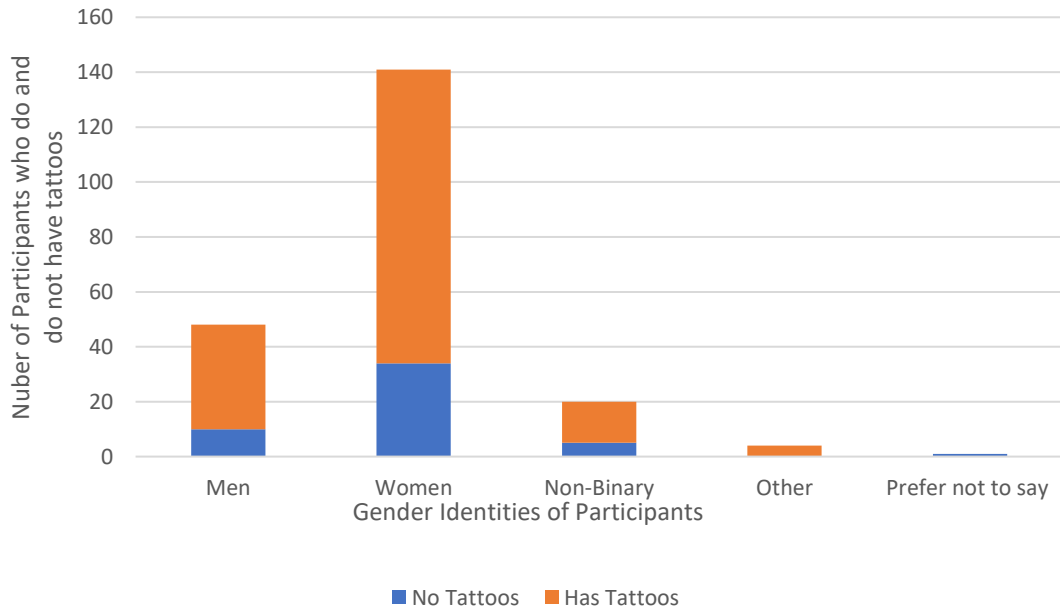


Figure 4: Ages of Survey Participants Who Do and Do Not Have Tattoos

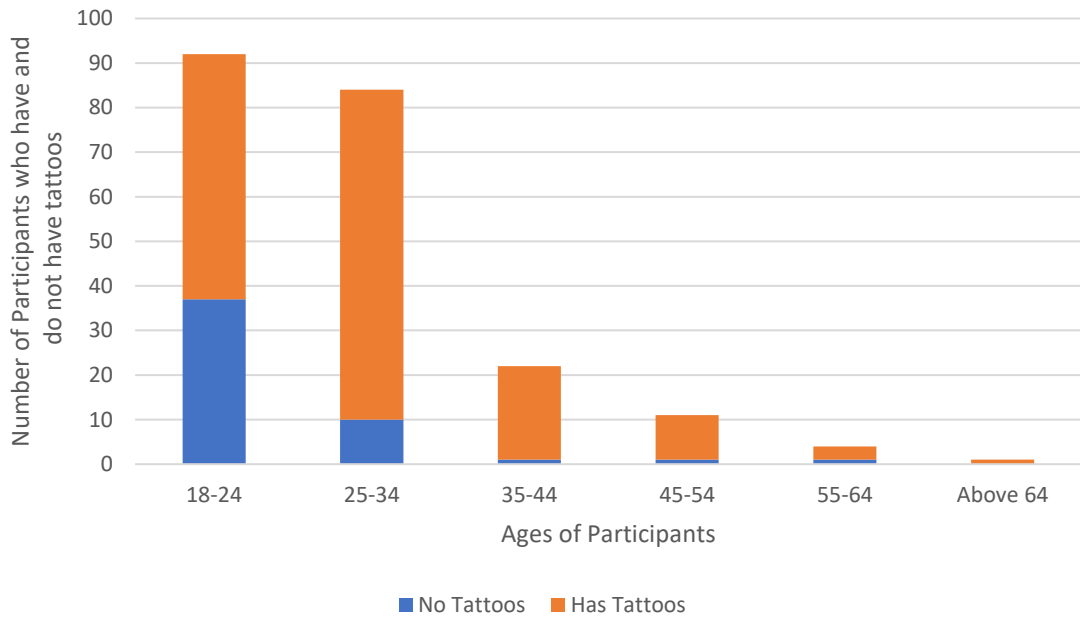


Figure 5: Ages of Participants and How Long They Spend on Social Media Per Day

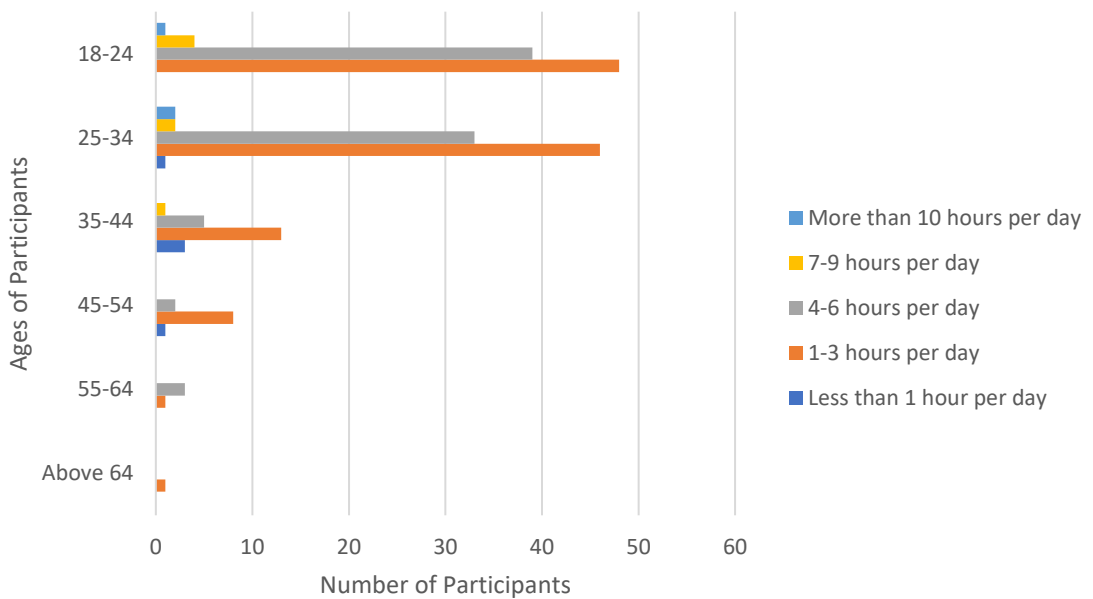


Figure 6: Responses for "What Participants are Looking for When Viewing Tattoo Related Content"

