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DOING GENDER WITH INK: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE OF  
GENDER AS A TATTOOED PERSON

BY

MEGHAN R. LEWIS

Sociology, B.A, Bridgewater State University, 2020

THESIS

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On May 20, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research surrounding tattoos and gender has shown that cismen and ciswomen's tattoos often differ in size, placement, and design, but little research has investigated why these differences persist. Furthermore, studies on tattoos and gender remain limited in scope as they mainly focus on the lived experiences of cisgender men and women. The current study seeks to expand previous research by including a more gender-diverse sample to investigate how the social construction of masculine and feminine tattoos occur, and how participants across the gender spectrum perform gender through tattoos. For this study, I conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with eight cismen, eight ciswomen, and four gender-nonconforming individuals, three of whom were nonbinary, and one who was a transman. Across the interviews, participants constructed unified notions of masculinity and femininity within tattoos, and cisgender individuals performed gender by upholding hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. In contrast, gender-nonconforming individuals embraced their nonconformity through tattoos. Ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals also reported negative experiences in male-dominated tattoo spaces marked by discomfort, intimidation, and sexual harassment. No cismen reported negative experiences of this nature, indicating that gender impacts the client-tattoo artist dynamic and the tattoo experience. This qualitative study underscores the salience of gender in the lives of tattooed individuals. However, further research is needed to understand how those who are gender nonconforming and those with intersectional identities may perform gender and experience life differently as tattooed individuals.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the practice of tattooing has permeated mainstream western culture. As a result, seeing a visibly tattooed person has become commonplace. The popularity of various television shows including *LA Ink*, *Miami Ink*, *Ink Master*, and *Tattoo Nightmares* is illustrative of the “tattoo renaissance” that has taken place since the 1970s (DeMello 2000). Despite the growing popularity and acceptance of tattoos, the art form and its subculture remain understudied, possibly due to societal stigma. Previous research has documented the associations between tattoos, criminality, and risk behaviors, and for some segments of society, tattoos continue to hold negative connotations (Forbes 2001, Laumann and Derick 2006; Wohlrab, Fink, Kappeler, and Brewer 2009; Heywood et al. 2012; Broussard and Harton 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020; Molly and Wagstaff 2021). Still, researchers over the years estimate that around one-quarter of the U.S. population has at least one tattoo, though others estimate a range of 15% to even 30% (Laumann and Derick 2006; Heywood et al. 2012; Swami and Harris 2012; Jackson 2019).

The practice of collecting tattoos is a form of body modification in which people seek to alter their physical body for non-medical, typically aesthetic, reasons (Swami and Harris 2012). Previous research has established that individuals across the gender spectrum obtain tattoos as a form of self-expression (Sweetman 1999; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Horne et al. 2007, Thompson 2015). Yet, scholars have also documented how tattoos can reinforce or challenge gender norms, noting that certain aspects of tattoos like the subject matter, size, and bodily placement have distinct masculine or feminine connotations (Atkinson 2002; Laumann and Derick 2006; Horne, Knox, Zusman, and Zusman 2007; Burgess and Clark 2010; Thompson 2015). Further, researchers such as DeMello (2000), Atkinson (2002; 2003), and Thompson

(2015) have shown that gender shapes the experiences of tattooed ciswomen, most notably through greater social sanctions for having tattoos. Although research regarding non-binary, genderqueer, and transgender individuals remains limited, findings from a recent study show that transfeminine and transmasculine individuals use tattoos for gender affirmation and scar coverage (Ragmanauskaite et al. 2020).

As noted, there is a large gap in the literature regarding tattoos amongst gender-nonconforming individuals. To my knowledge, the current study is the first qualitative study to incorporate perspectives from gender-nonconforming individuals into conversations about gender and tattoos. The current study consists of twenty participants, comprised of eight cisgender men, eight cisgender women, three nonbinary participants, and one transgender man. Additionally, previous research gives little empirical attention to the ways cisgender, transgender, and gender-nonconforming participants may construct masculinity and femininity. Therefore, I chose to study how participants across the gender identity spectrum construct and perform gender through tattoos. In doing so, I ask the following questions: How do participants of various gender identities socially construct masculinity and femininity using tattoos? How do the experiences of tattooed participants differ across gender identities? Lastly, how do participants uphold dominant gender ideologies through discussing, defining, and describing their tattoos? In answering these questions, I found that all participants constructed unified notions of masculinity and femininity. Cisgender participants used tattoos to perform gender by upholding notions of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity. In comparison, gender non-conforming participants used their tattoos to deconstruct gender binaries. Moreover, I have concluded that gender remains a salient force in the client-tattoo artist experiences of



ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals and that ciswomen experience a greater gendered tattoo stigma than their cismen counterparts.

As tattoos rise in popularity, it is imperative social scientists continue to investigate how body modifications can provide individuals the opportunities to construct and perform their own unique gender identities. Likewise, research on tattoos and gender offers further clarity in understanding how permanent body modifications impact the lived experiences of the gendered individuals that wear them. As I discuss relevant findings from the scholarship on tattoos and gender it is important to note that I use the researcher's terms when referring to study participants. However, when discussing the findings of my own work, I distinguish between the terms cisgender and gender-nonconforming and highlight specific gender-nonconforming individuals' gender identities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Westernization of Tattoos*

Scholars suggest that the westernization of tattooing occurred through colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One main actor responsible for spreading the practice of tattooing to Europe was captain James Cook (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Swami and Harris 2012; Thompson 2015). Cook, employed to colonize land, traveled to the Pacific islands of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia where he and the British navy men accompanying him encountered tattooed Tahitians, Samoans, Hawaiians, and Māori peoples (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Swami and Harris 2012). In fact, European colonizers adapted the word tattoo from the Tahitian word *ta-tu* or *tatau* (DeMello 200; Atkinson 2003; Swami and Harris 2012). Indigenous tattoos have important cultural meanings, such as signaling strength, identity, and lineage (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). During their time among the indigenous peoples of

the Pacific islands, the cultural practice of tattooing captivated many of Captain Cook's men and some went so far as to acquire their own tattoos (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Swami and Harris 2012).

Despite a few of Cook's men obtaining tattoos, the relationship between the tattooed peoples of the Pacific islands and European colonizers was unequal and exploitative. Europeans used the presence of tattoos as a justification for European ethnocentrism (Atkinson 2003; Thompson 2015); tattoos functioned as a physical marker to further distinguish "savage" peoples with a "primal" tradition from "pure," white colonizers. By the late 1700s, Europeans captured and enslaved many tattooed indigenous peoples and put them on display throughout Europe as "primitives" (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003). The brutality of European explorers also extended into hunting tattooed indigenous peoples, most notably the Māori people of Polynesia. In the Māori culture, it is customary to receive facial tattoos known as *mokos*. Māori peoples believe that mokos store one's spiritual being (DeMello 2000). In an extreme exercise of power and supremacy, Europeans killed and beheaded Māori men and women, using their heads to trade for goods or as souvenirs of the newly discovered islands (Atkinson 2003). Due to such cruelty, a great number of Māori tribes discontinued the cultural practice of tattooing for nearly a century due to fear of being hunted (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003).

The exhibition of tattoos also extended into American culture, as late nineteenth and early twentieth century circuses included either tattooed indigenous Pacific islanders or tattooed North Americans as sideshow oddities (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Thompson 2015). Atkinson (2003) reported that many non-native tattooed individuals fabricated stories of being tattooed against their will by natives. Such fabricated stories reaffirmed the idea of a "savage" native and rendered tattooing a deviant practice. Due to the marginalization of tattooed bodies, tattoos in the

early twentieth-century United States remained reserved for members of total institutions, like bikers, gang members, prisoners, and even sailors (Thompson 2015). Tattoos provided members of total institutions the ability to permanently display their in-group status, yet while such tattooed individuals successfully signaled their in-group status they were also cast as deviant by society at large (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). As a result, before the tattoo renaissance, tattoos often expressed group affiliation but also reinforced societal notions of normative body presentations.

Through the same working-class and alternative subcultures of bikers, gang members, prisoners, and sailors, tattoos in the U.S. grew in popularity. DeMello (2000) argues that during the 1960s, working-class individuals, such as metal workers and carpenters, popularized North American tattooing, helping to lessen the stigmatization of tattoos over time. Progressive social movements of the 1960s also worked to destigmatize tattoos. As the civil rights and women's liberation movements grew, more and more of the U.S. population obtained tattoos to reclaim their own identities and rebel against oppressive cultural norms (Atkinson 2003; Swami and Harris 2012). Soon after, the media began to focus less on tattooed bikers, gang members, prisoners, and rowdy sailors and reframed the practice in more appealing ways to larger groups of people (DeMello 2000; Kosut 2006). Propelled by the media, the tattoo renaissance – a period marked by visibly tattooed celebrities, especially musicians – began to seep into everyday life. By the 1990s, a growing number of middle-class consumers collected tattoos (Atkinson 2003; Kosut 2006). Although the share of the U.S. population that has a tattoo is difficult to gauge, researchers most commonly suggest around one-quarter of the United States population has at least one tattoo, though these estimations can range from around 15% to 30% (Laumann and Derick 2006; Heywood et al. 2012; Swami and Harris 2012; Jackson 2019).

## MEDIA, SOCIALIZATION, AND TATTOO CULTURE

### *Media*

Scholarship about the practice of tattooing has noted that well-known television shows and celebrities had a strong influence in popularizing tattoos during the tattoo renaissance (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Kosut 2006; Adams 2009; Thompson 2015; 2019). For instance, the 2000s and 2010s saw an explosion of tattoo-centric reality television shows that brought tattoos into millions of U.S. homes. In researching this genre, Thompson (2018) notes there are over 24 tattoo-centric reality television shows, some of which have expanded beyond North America and made their way to Spain and Australia. Perhaps the most well-known tattoo-centric television shows are *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink*, which depict the day-to-day lives of tattoo artists in their shops. Similarly, the show *Ink Master* shows artists tattooing clients, referred to as “human canvases,” as judges determine who stays and who goes home week to week based on tattoo artistry and skill. Tattoo-themed reality television gained a massive following, evidenced by the 2.1 million viewers that tuned in to watch the Season 8 finale of *Ink Master*, 57% of whom were female viewers (Paramount Network 2017).

As tattoo television shows became more mainstream, their effects on tattooed individuals and tattoo artists themselves became more noticeable. In interviewing both tattoo collectors and tattoo artists, Thompson (2019) found that female tattoo collectors often felt impressed by the female representation on *LA Ink*, whose main character is famous tattoo artist Kat Von D. In contrast, many female tattoo artists saw the reality TV show as delegitimizing the tattoo industry. For example, episodes of *LA Ink* show Von D disregarding sterilization practices by smoking, drinking coffee, and even petting cats with her gloves on (Thompson 2019). Kosut (2006) also noted that like reality television shows, tattooed celebrities have brought tattoos into mainstream

middle-class society. For instance, Kosut (2006) calls attention to tattooed celebrities like Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie and asserts that celebrity tattoos, at a minimum, aid in reconstructing tattoos as an acceptable form of art and self-expression. An even earlier example of tattooed celebrities influencing the middle class to get tattoos is Janis Joplin in the 1970s. Famous tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle, who tattooed a heart onto Joplin's wrist, went on to state that after Joplin's death he tattooed the same heart on over a hundred other women. Tuttle's story demonstrates the influence of celebrity tattoos (Thompson 2015).

Print media has also proven influential in tattoo popularity. DeMello (2000) explains that many newspaper and magazine articles frame tattoos as a new and popular trend among young people. Such framing underscores the difference between traditional, often marginalized, tattoo collectors like bikers, gang members, punks, prisoners, and sailors, and more normative middle-class populations (DeMello 2000; Kosut 2006; Adams 2009). Adams (2009) analyzed major newspaper articles from 2000 to 2007 and found that articles about tattoos displayed a growing middle-class acceptance of the art, especially for women. In these same articles, however, Adams notes the authors also used rhetoric that reinforced the belief that tattoos are deviant forms of expression. Moreover, Adams' (2009) analysis found a link between body modification and "risk-taking" behaviors. Authors framed tattoos in a negative light and inadvertently strengthened the harmful association of risk behaviors to tattoos (Adams 2009). On a broader note, Kosut (2006) draws attention to the ways that tattoos have proliferated everyday life, as children now grow up with temporary tattoos and tattoo coloring books of their favorite cartoon characters.

*Socialization*

Another factor that has the potential to influence individuals' personal beliefs about tattoos is socialization. Many researchers suggest that individuals exposed to tattoos or tattooed family members while growing up tend to have more positive views of tattoos (Forbes 2001; Lande, Bahroo, and Soumoff 2013; Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko 2014; Thompson 2015). In his study of college undergraduates, Forbes (2001) found that participants with tattoos were more likely to report having siblings, romantic partners, and close friends with tattoos than their non-tattooed counterparts. Dickson et al. (2014) found that respondents who had friends or family members with tattoos were less likely to stigmatize tattoos. Likewise, Lande et al. (2013) gathered a convenience sample of active-duty service members and concluded that eight in ten participants reported positive family socialization toward tattoos. In other words, participants had positive relationships with tattooed family members and felt more comfortable with tattoos in general (Lande et al. 2013).

In her ethnographic work, *Covered in Ink*, Thompson (2015) found that many of the heavily tattooed women recalled having tattooed family members who introduced them to the art of tattooing. Even in instances where no family members were visibly tattooed, Thompson (2015) observed parents who remained flexible and respectful of their children's personal choices allowed for the child-parent relationship to remain positive. Simply being open to the idea of obtaining a tattoo also has important implications in terms of tattoo collecting. For example, a study on tattoo stigma by Burgess and Clark (2010) found that participants who considered getting a tattoo were less judgmental towards the study's tattooed job applicants compared to participants who did not consider getting a tattoo. However, researchers have also noted instances where tattooed participants judge a fellow tattooed person just as harshly as their non-tattooed counterparts (Funk and Todorov 2013; Broussard and Harton 2018). In sum,

socialization may indeed influence one's perceptions of tattooed people and one's inclination to obtain a tattoo, however, other social factors and personal motivations may also affect an individual's thoughts on tattoos and tattooed people.

### *Not Just a Fad*

The westernization of tattoos and their increasing popularity has led many people to question whether tattoos are merely a fad. In response to this question, scholarly research demonstrates that tattoos exemplify a greater process of adornment and collecting rather than a simple fashion statement. For instance, Shilling (1993) discusses the *body project*, a sociological term used to explain the ways that people monitor, tend to, and alter their bodies. Shilling (1993) cites self-care and cosmetic regimens, such as shaving, applying makeup, bodybuilding, and cosmetic surgery, as normative body projects. Likewise, Sweetman (1999) utilizes Shilling's (1993) framework to assert that tattoos function as body projects in which tattooed individuals seek to construct and maintain a visible identity. Furthermore, tattoos act as a pronounced body project. In other words, unlike cosmetic surgery that seeks to go undetected, tattoos require the collector to outwardly wear the modification and even face social sanctions for doing so (Thompson 2015).

Still, conceptualizing tattoos as body projects does not make them immune to trends. Bearing this in mind, Kosut (2006) theorizes tattoos as an *ironic fad*, wherein tattoos may be popular and trendy, yet their permanence prevents them from being discarded like an item of clothing. Thompson (2015) notes that fairies, "tribal tattoos" (typically black ink tattoos with thick lines and geometric patterns), and Japanese-inspired tattoos were popular throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, respectively. Still, researchers point out that the processes of planning, designing, obtaining, and healing a tattoo require time, money, and pain, further distancing

tattoos from a fashion item (Sweetman 1999; Kosut 2006). Tattoo enthusiasts have also moved away from the once-popular “flash sheet” tattoos (papers or posters with pre-made drawings that customers would pick a design from) and toward custom tattoos. Therefore, tattooed individuals are investing more time and thought into such body projects (Sweetman 1999; Thompson 2015). The painful and permanent process of getting tattooed also bonds the tattoo to the consumer (Sweetman 1999; Kosut 2006). In this way, individuals cannot separate their tattoos from themselves.

Although tattoos may resist true fad status, they have become increasingly commodified and even seen as a means for conformity. The media has rebranded tattoos for middle-class, often young, populations (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Kosut 2006). Atkinson (2003) notes that many commercial advertisements have made tattoos more visible and used the form of body modification to sell clothes, phone plans, and even alcohol. Advancements in sterilization and tattoo technology have also bolstered the popularity and longevity of tattooing as cultural practice in western societies. Adams (2012) explains that although tattooing is not an inherently medical practice, most tattoo artists adhere to medicalized processes of sterilization, such as single-use gloves and sterile needles with every customer. Adams (2012) calls this aspect of tattooing the “medical façade,” in which tattoo artists and shops use medical terms, practices, and equipment to ensure the safety and comfort of their clients. As a result of the medical façade, more people are likely to obtain tattoos if they believe it is safe and sanitary (Adams 2012). In essence, the commodification and medicalization of tattooing have legitimized the art form as a widespread practice rather than a fleeting fad.

Many tattoo enthusiasts have unique, custom tattoos that take a great deal of time and effort to design. However, for individuals who do not choose the custom design route, there are



other ways to engage in tattooing while not experiencing significant stigmatization. Scholars suggest that people who elect to have smaller, more concealable tattoos experience less stigmatization from society as they do not deviate from body norms the same way that heavily tattooed persons do (Burgess and Clarke 2010; Thompson 2015; Nash 2018). Thus, presenting one's body as lightly tattooed allows for conformity; society regards smaller tattoos as *decorative* and not an overt modification of the body (Sweetman 1999). Likewise, choosing tattoos that are "in-style" provides individuals a buffer from social sanctions (Kosut 2006; Thompson 2015). Recently, *Inked Mag* (2021), a popular tattoo magazine, predicted that tattoos ranging in styles from abstract blackwork to delicate ornamental tattoos will rise in popularity during 2022. Nonetheless, as a growing number of U.S. citizens obtain tattoos, a range of styles and motifs may aid in conforming to a new generation of tattooed openness while still retaining a normative representation of the self. Although the placement of tattoos and adherence to trends may buffer the effects of stigma, research still associates tattoos with deviant behaviors (Laumann and Derick 2006; Funk and Todorov 2013 Forbes 2001, Laumann and Derick 2006; Heywood et al. 2012).

## SOCIETAL STIGMA AND TATTOOS

Although the media has undoubtedly shaped societal perceptions of tattoos and often worked to edit out the long-time tattoo collectors (DeMello 2000; Kosut 2006), research still suggests that the stigma surrounding tattoos has persisted well into the tattoo renaissance. Erving Goffman's (2006) work on stigma proves applicable to societal perceptions of tattoos, as he provides three different conceptualizations of stigma: 1) abominations of the body, 2) blemishes of character, and 3) stigmas of race, religion, and nationality. Tattoos fall into a grey area between the first two definitions, as society regards them not only as modifications but also

abominations of the body that can have implications on one's character. For example, Cesar Lombroso (2007) believed that tattoos served as observable markers of criminality. Lombroso (2007) asserted that tattoos were an indication of primitivism and symptomatic of one's deviance and low-class standing. To try to prove such assertions, Lombroso studied tattoos on soldiers, criminals, and prostitutes. However, in a sample of 102 cases, Lombroso found only two instances of tattoos that symbolized violence (2007). Lombroso's work remained largely influential on societal perceptions of tattoos, and despite academics seeking to research tattoos more objectively, many continue to draw on disadvantaged and marginalized populations (Thompson 2015).

Although societal attitudes towards tattoos have shifted in the past thirty years, the criminal stereotype and subsequent stigma attached to tattoos may still be present (Laumann and Derick 2006; Funk and Todorov 2013). Laumann and Derick (2006) utilized random digit dialing to achieve a national probability sample of people with tattoos and piercings in the United States. The researchers found that 76% of participants with multiple tattoos reported being in jail for three or more days at some point in their life (Laumann and Derick 2006). Funk and Todorov (2013) conducted a three-part study in which they sought to examine the effect of face tattoos on both the verdict and sentencing stages of a court trial. Participants were more likely to find individuals with a face tattoo guilty, but the type of crime (tax fraud or assault) did not affect the verdict. In sum, the researchers found that the presence of a face tattoo indeed activated a criminal stereotype in participants, however, facial tattoos did not affect how participants sentenced an individual (Funk and Todorov 2013). Also pertinent to the discussion of criminality and tattoos is the cataloging of "gang tattoos" by law enforcement organizations. Thompson (2015) argues keeping such databases of arrestees' tattoos is extremely harmful to

tattooed individuals and tattoo culture, as a whole, because it reinforces the idea that tattoos signal criminality.

The stigmatization of tattoo collectors as deviant and mentally unstable occurs, in part, by researchers who link risk-taking behaviors to tattoo acquisition (Forbes 2001, Laumann and Derick 2006; Heywood et al. 2012). In a sample of 323 undergraduate students in an anthropology class, Forbes (2001), found that men and women with body modifications (piercings and/or tattoos) reported doing reckless things as a child, having more traffic tickets, and using alcohol and marijuana more often than non-modified participants. In particular, Forbes (2001) found that 32.8 % of body-modified women smoked compared to only 15.3% of non-modified women. Laumann and Derick (2006) also reported greater rates of recreational drug and alcohol use amongst tattooed individuals compared to non-tattooed individuals. Similarly, Heywood et al. (2012) found that tattooed men smoked two times more than non-tattooed men. Moreover, men and women who reported 11 or more sexual partners in their lifetime are more likely to be tattooed (Heywood et al. 2012). Studies that link tattoo acquisition to heightened levels of criminality and risk behaviors underscore the persistent stigmatization that tattooed individuals face. As Atkinson (2003) warns, “by casting the practice of tattooing in an ‘either/or’ analytical framework, we ignore the possibility that tattooing is, in fact, both normative *and* deviant.” In other words, tattooed people are not a monolith; tattooed individuals have unique backgrounds and experiences but engage in the same art form.

### *Gendered Tattoo Stigma*

In an effort to explore the nuanced experiences of tattoo stigma, several researchers have discovered that women face a unique gendered stigma. This gendered tattoo stigma pulls from existing associations of tattoos with criminality, risk, and deviance, but becomes gendered as

society calls into question tattooed women's beauty, worth, and femininity (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015; Nash 2018). Throughout her interviews with heavily tattooed women, Thompson (2015) notes that many women experienced social sanctions from friends, family members, and the general public that called into question their attractiveness. For instance, sentiments such as, "You're such a pretty girl, why would you do that to yourself?" and, "What are those tattoos going to look like when you are old?" perpetuate the idea that tattoos are destructive to a woman's beauty, a primary source of her worth in a patriarchal society (Thompson 2015). Moreover, tattooed mothers experience stigma because society views them as impure, unfit, or even selfish for getting tattoos (Thompson 2015). Society prioritizes the selfless mother who is a caretaker first rather than tattooed mothers who "indulge" in their body projects (Thompson 2015). Nash (2018) also draws on motherhood as a metaphor, as she explains that the public experiences of many visibly tattooed women parallel those of pregnant women. Both bodies, Nash (2018) argues, are subject to public questions, judgment, and even morals. Nash (2018) explains that strangers often touch pregnant women's bellies and ask questions about their pregnancy, the same way many strangers touch women's tattoos and ask the meaning of their tattoos.

Despite the negative social sanctions women face for being tattooed, many report that tattoos afford them a sense of agency over their own bodies (Pitts 1998; Atkinson 2002; 2003; Thompson 2015; Nash 2018; Maxwell, Thomas, and Thomas 2020). Although Pitts (1998) investigated more extreme cases of body modification like scarification and branding, Pitts notes that body modifications, including tattoos, allow for an individual to achieve a new "bodily character." In other words, individuals re-write their own physical narrative and alter their bodies in unique ways. Nash (2018) tells a similar story of agency, as she sought out a tattoo to help her

through her divorce. Nash (2018:378) explains, “I felt so ashamed [of my divorce], I could not bring myself to tell my closest friends about my pain. Instead, the tattoo allowed me one outlet to express emotions that would have otherwise been pushed away from view.”

Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen (2015) further illuminate the potential healing power of tattoos. The researchers found that participants with a greater number of tattoos were more likely to report a history of suicide attempts compared to non-tattooed individuals. However, Koch et al. (2015) identified an interesting paradox; women’s levels of self-esteem increase along with the number of tattoos they have. Similarly, Atkinson (2002) explains that tattooed female participants often used their tattoos as a means of empowerment, citing a participant’s recollection of an acquaintance who got an angel tattoo as a way to reconcile sexual trauma she had experienced as a teen. More recently, Maxwell et al. (2020) interviewed ten self-identified survivors of sexual assault who had at least one tattoo and found overwhelming evidence to support the assertion that tattoos are cathartic. For the sampled survivors, their tattoos acted as both a way to take control of their body back and to resist normative patriarchal means of healing, like therapy. Maxwell et al. (2020) explained that the women cite a preference for tattooing over traditional forms of therapy, as tattoos challenged normative perceptions of beauty and femininity.

## GENDER AND TATTOOS

Previous research demonstrates that tattooed individuals still face a general societal stigma (Atkinson 2003; Funk and Todorov 2013; Dickson et al. 2014) and that women face a distinctive gendered stigma as their motivations, worth, beauty, and femininity are called into question when modifying their bodies (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015). However, research has yet to address how individuals across the gender spectrum “do gender” and reproduce

subordinated gender dynamics. In their classic sociological framework of “doing gender,” West and Zimmerman (1987) theorize that gender is socially constructed and subsequently performed by individuals on a day-to-day basis. In line with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) framework of “doing gender,” tattoos provide an interesting basis on which to study gender performance. As individuals may perform gender by the style of dress or haircut, they may also perform gender through modifying their bodies with tattoos. For instance, tattoo placement, size, and subject matter can differ in men and women and can aid or hinder the perceived attractiveness, strength, and independence, amongst other factors, of the tattooed person (Atkinson 2002; Laumann and Derick 2006; Horne et al. 2007; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Burgess and Clark 2010; Thompson 2015; Broussard and Harton 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020; Molly and Wagstaff 2021).

The theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are also useful in understanding how cismen and ciswomen may use tattoos to perform gender. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) theorize, hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity exist in an asymmetrical power dynamic within a patriarchal society. While hegemonic masculinity is not the only form of masculinity, it is the most culturally valued and dominant ideology of masculinity (Donaldson 1993; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Scholars explain that hegemonic masculinity centers on heterosexuality, physical strength, dominance, and aggression (Donaldson 1993; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is particularly relevant to discussions surrounding gender and tattoos, as scholars have concluded that tattoos can bolster men’s perceived dominance (Wohlrab et al. 2009; Broussard and Harton 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020). Although previous research has yet to apply the framework of emphasized femininity to tattooed women, studies have shown that women obtain smaller tattoos in discreet places (Atkinson 2002; Laumann and Derick 2006). Therefore, it is possible that

women engage in body projects while also performing emphasized femininity as they make efforts to protect their established femininity and comply with subordinated gender dynamics. In sum, men's hegemonic masculinity may benefit from tattoos, whereas women may engage in emphasized femininity by keeping their tattooed status at bay.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that most previous research focuses on the gender performance and life experiences of tattooed cismen and ciswomen, leaving many gender-nonconforming populations out of tattoo research. Similarly, much of the research on gender performance and tattoos neglects to consider how notions of masculinity and femininity can simultaneously exist on a continuum, and how all individuals in our social world construct masculinities and femininities. In other words, it is not only cisgender men and women who construct masculinity and femininity; cisgender and gender-nonconforming individuals have ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that also construct masculinity and femininity.

#### *Attitudes and Perceptions of Tattooed Men*

Previous research has shown that people perceive tattooed cismen as more masculine than their non-tattooed counterparts (Wohlrab et al. 2009; Broussard and Harton 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020). However, to understand why society affords tattooed cismen positive attributions, it is necessary to acknowledge the male-dominated culture of North American tattooing. Scholars trace the modern, male-dominated nature of western tattooing back to tattoo artists and clients who were bikers, gang members, prisoners, sailors, and working-class men. These visibly tattooed men helped to popularize tattooing in the U.S. (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). For instance, U.S. sailors would obtain tattoos while on rest and recuperation, often getting images of military motifs to symbolize their affiliation with, and pride in, their military careers (Thompson 2015). Although tattoos, in general, remain stigmatized as exemplified

through criminal and risk-taking stereotypes, previous research suggests that society celebrates tattooed men for their modifications and in turn experience less severe social sanctions for their tattoos (Horne et al. 2007; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Broussard and Harton 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020; Molly and Wagstaff 2021).

One way that cismen experience fewer social sanctions for their tattoos is through perceived attractiveness (Horne et al. 2007; Molly and Wagstaff 2021). In one study of 400 undergraduate participants, Horne et al. (2007) reported that 71.1% of undergraduate women found men “sometimes attractive” with tattoos compared to 58.8% of men who found visibly tattooed women “sometimes attractive.” A more recent study by Molloy and Wagstaff (2021) also examined the effects of gender and attractiveness on perceptions of tattoos, albeit with a slightly different focus. In this case, Molloy and Wagstaff (2021) asked heterosexual women to evaluate three different images of a man and rate how attractive they found him. These images depicted the stimulus with no tattoos, a medium-sized tattoo covering the left side of the chest, and a large tattoo that extended the chest tattoo across both sides and even onto the stomach and shoulders. Respondents viewed the medium-sized tattoo stimulus as more attractive than the other stimuli (Molloy and Wagstaff 2021). Interestingly, Molloy and Wagstaff (2021) also found that increasing the size of a tattoo on the man caused participants to perceive him as less fit for fatherhood. Such findings indicate that the size of one’s tattoo may influence the level at which one experiences stigma.

In comparison, to Molloy and Wagstaff’s (2021) findings, Galbarczyk et al. (2020) found that when rating tattooed and non-tattooed images of men, heterosexual men were the only group to find the tattooed stimuli more attractive compared to heterosexual women and lesbian women. It is possible that the heterosexual men in the aforementioned study view tattoos as a way to



enhance their own attractiveness while engaging in a traditionally masculine form of body modification. Galbarczyk et al. (2020) also concluded that heterosexual men and women perceived tattooed men as more dominant, aggressive, and masculine; these perceptions underscore the value of performing hegemonic masculinity through tattoos. Likewise, using digital images of non-tattooed and tattooed men and women, researchers at a German university observed that both men and women participants found tattooed men more dominant than non-tattooed men (Wohlrab et al. 2009). Additionally, when investigating the interaction between participants' genders and tattoo status (whether or not they had a tattoo at the time of the study), Broussard and Harton (2018) noticed that tattooed male participants rated images of tattooed men as more independent than images of non-tattooed men. Thus, Wohlrab et al. (2009), Broussard and Harton (2018), and Galbarczyk et al. (2020) provide evidence for the idea that tattoos can bolster the performance of men's hegemonic masculinity.

#### *Attitudes and Perceptions of Tattooed Women*

Researchers note that tattooed women, especially those who are heavily tattooed, experience greater stigmatization by friends, family, and society at large (Atkinson 2002; 2003; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Thompson 2015; Broussard and Harton 2018; Nash 2018). Unlike cismen, whose tattoos bolster masculine traits, such as dominance, aggression, and at times, attractiveness, women face more harsh societal attitudes and perceptions. For instance, Wohlrab et al. (2009) found that participants rated images of tattooed women as less healthy compared to non-tattooed women. Musambira, Raymond, and Hastings (2016) also found that participants had negative perceptions of tattooed women. They conducted a quantitative study with 376 randomly assigned undergraduate students to examine the perceptions of younger and older tattooed women. Musambira et al. (2016) used photos of a 23-year-old woman and a 48-year-

old woman wearing no tattoos, rose tattoos, or tribal tattoos and measured participants' perceptions of credibility, physical attractiveness, and promiscuity. The researchers found that participants perceived both women as most credible and attractive when they did not have tattoos (Musambira et al. 2016). However, when the women did have tattoos, participants perceived them as more promiscuous than the non-tattooed stimuli (Musambira et al. 2016).

Similarly, Broussard and Harton (2018) conducted a two-stage study in an attempt to gauge participants' perceptions of tattooed men and women, first using an undergraduate sample and then using an older, adult sample. Across both stages of the study, the researchers found that both groups of participants rated tattooed women as more independent and stronger than non-tattooed women (Broussard and Harton 2018). However, participants also rated tattooed women more negatively in terms of broad characteristics, such as intelligence, trustworthiness, capability, and honesty. Also, as previously noted, male participants in Horne et al. (2007) found tattooed women attractive 58.8% of the time, compared to men who female participants found attractive 71.1% of the time. Researchers Molloy and Wagstaff (2021) have also documented the levels of self-rated attractiveness amongst tattooed women. They concluded that women with tattoos rated themselves as significantly less attractive than their non-tattooed counterparts (Molloy and Wagstaff 2021). In sum, tattooed women are perceived in more negative ways than tattooed men (Atkinson 2002; 2003; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Thompson 2015; Musambira et al. 2016; Broussard and Harton 2018; Nash 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020), and it is possible that women may internalize such negative societal judgments and view themselves as less attractive (Molloy and Wagstaff 2021).

Although scholarship on tattoos in transgender populations remains limited, one 2020 study found that transgender individuals also seek emotional healing through tattoos. In a survey

of 696 transgender individuals, Ragmanauskaite et al. (2020) found that transmasculine participants report gender identity affirmation as the second most popular reason for getting a tattoo after the category labeled personal preferences, aesthetics, and symbolism. Other similar but less popular reasons for getting a tattoo, include scar coverage and replacement of an anatomical feature (Ragmanauskaite et al. 2020). Although findings of reclamation and emotional healing are common amongst cisgender women, it is possible that both transgender populations and cisgender women share similar motivations for tattoos because such identities experience oppression and body policing within a patriarchal society.

### *Reinforcing or Resisting Gender Norms*

Previous research has widely explored societal perceptions of tattooed individuals (Atkinson 2002; 2003; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Thompson 2015; Musambira et al. 2016; Broussard and Harton 2018; Nash 2018; Galbarczyk et al. 2020; Molly and Wagstaff 2021). Additionally, research on the subject matter, size, and placement of tattoos is also valuable in understanding how tattoos can aid in “doing gender.” For example, Horne et al. (2007) found that a majority of their tattooed male participants (83.3%) were more likely to agree with the phrase “tattoos are a statement of who I am” compared to 70.3% of women. Furthermore, the researchers suggest that men may use the imagery in their tattoos to signal personal, group, or familial identities, whereas women may use their tattoos to communicate notions of beauty (Horne et al 2007). Burgess and Clark (2010) bolster such findings from Horne et al. (2007), as they found that participants regarded specific tattoo motifs as having gendered implications. Burgess and Clark (2010) first had participants group tattoos “in a way that made the most sense to them personally” and then asked participants to describe their groupings. The researchers noted that participants grouped together tattoos depicting suns, dolphins, and small shapes and

described these groupings as cute, modern, and friendly. In contrast, tattoos done with thick black lines and images of barbed wire, snakes, and Celtic designs were always grouped together and described by participants as aggressive, bold, tribal, and bad. Moreover, Burgess and Clark (2010) reported that participants believed women were most likely to have “cute” tattoos, while they believed men were more likely to have “aggressive” tattoos. Such findings illustrate the normative gendered boundaries for tattooed individuals. However, lacking from Horne et al. (2007) and Burgess and Clark (2010) are the ways that tattooed individuals themselves viewed their gender performance regarding their tattoo and how non-cisgender individuals grouped and categorized tattoo motifs. Instead, the researchers analyzed implicit notions of gender rather than asking participants how they may explicitly do gender through their tattoos.

Atkinson (2002) also draws attention to typical tattoo designs used to perform gender. Through interviewing 92 tattoo collectors, Atkinson (2002) noticed that tattoos often had the power to reproduce gender norms of femininity and masculinity. Atkinson (2002) found that many women chose tattoos of flowers, animals, suns, moons, and even female cartoon characters like Minnie Mouse and Hello Kitty to not threaten their established femininity. On the other hand, women who sought to resist normative notions of femininity often chose imagery including skulls, hearts and daggers, eagles, and tribal designs because participants viewed these as masculine (Atkinson 2002). Yet, Atkinson (2002) does not investigate how tattoo designs in gender-nonconforming individuals may contribute to their gender performance, nor do they examine gender performance within a subordinated gender dynamic.

Thompson (2015) also learned that many heavily tattooed women lean into the ability to resist gender norms through tattoos by taking traditionally feminine icons, like Marilyn Monroe or pin-up girls, and zombifying them. The idea of taking a famous feminine portrait and

distorting it through tattoos perhaps illustrates not only the resistance of traditional gender norms but also the existence of non-traditional forms of femininity. Still, heavily tattooed women with “unfeminine” tattoos indeed face social sanctions. For instance, Nash (2018), a feminist scholar from Australia, states that her bold, American-traditional style tattoos garnered criticism from her peers. Nash (2018:374) recalls that her colleagues’ comments “[suggested]” that [she] had gone too far in rejecting feminine but perhaps also middle class norms.”

Atkinson’s (2002) thoughts noted above, along with Thompson’s (2015) and Nash’s (2018) findings are especially understandable when considering that prior to the tattoo renaissance when tattoo collectors were predominantly men, many tattoo shops had flash sheets strictly for women. Similarly, in the 1950s a famous tattoo artist named Samuel Steward refused to tattoo women without their husbands present. Steward’s policy displays the male-dominant culture of North American tattooing and supports the idea that women must use tattoos as reinforcers, not resisters, of femininity. However, it is also possible that tattooing provides women the means to engage in masculinity, as tattooing is widely seen as a male practice, while allowing them to retain their femininity and avoid societal stigma. What previous research does not address is how women may do degrees of masculinity, and how this aspect of their gender identity may affect the way they do femininity.

Tattoo collectors must also consider the placement of their tattoos since different parts of the body allow for varying levels of concealability. Laumann and Derick’s (2006) nationally representative sample of body-modified persons in the U.S. showed that women were significantly more likely to have only non-visible tattoos. Additionally, men were more likely to have tattoos on their arms and larger tattoos overall compared to women (Laumann and Derick 2006). Horne et al. (2007) states that 72.2% of women and 60.2% of men agreed that their

parents would disapprove of a visible tattoo. Horne et al. (2007) also found that twice as many (31.5%) men saw their tattoos as “symbols of resistance to our culture” compared to only 15.63% of women who ascribed to such a notion. Furthermore, Atkinson (2002) notes that for women the size of a tattoo can jeopardize one’s level of femininity, citing further that large tattoos are inconsistent with established constructions of femininity. Such findings from Atkinson (2002) and Horne et al. (2007) relate to Laumann and Derick’s (2006) findings of concealability since women are more likely to obtain tattoos that are smaller in size and in more discreet places to conform to cultural norms of femininity. As Thompson (2015) explains, the act of being a tattooed person is not inherently transgressive. Instead, becoming a heavily tattooed person, especially for women, is resistant to gender norms as women make the conscious decision to engage in a large-scale body project (Shilling 1993; Thompson 2015).

### *Race, Ethnicity, and Tattoos*

North American tattoo culture has its roots in European colonization and exclusivity (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). The bikers, gang members, prisoners, and rowdy sailors that popularized tattoos in the U.S. were largely white individuals (DeMello 2000). As a result, researchers have shed light on how people of color engage in a tattoo culture that privileges white individuals. Through observations, Horne et al. (2007), noticed that many African American tattoo collectors obtained the names of loved ones, remembrance tattoos, or tattoos with religious motifs, such as praying hands and crosses. Sims (2018) found that African American participants’ tattoos did not depict African heritage or black pride, perhaps due to societal sentiments of anti-blackness. Findings on tattoos in black Americans from Horne et al. (2007) and Sims (2018) may also illustrate that many black Americans hold deep connections with faith and are unaware of their distinct African heritage, both factors that trace back to the

forcible relocation of slavery. Furthermore, black individuals experience difficulty when seeking a tattoo since many tattoo artists do not advertise their work on darker skin tones, and some tattoo artists refuse to tattoo darker complexions in the first place (Shah 2016; Yzola 2019). Black, female tattoo artist Jacci Gresham explains, “we have been brainwashed with this flash on a white paper. When you work on darker skin, you have to adjust your design to the color of the skin” (Yzola 2019). The Season 2 winner of *Ink Master*, Steve Tefft, even said, “I don't want the dark canvases, they take away half your skill sets,” thus Tefft exemplifies the discrimination many black tattoo collectors face.

Tattoos can also be a source of racial, ethnic, and cultural appropriation (Sims 2018). In their qualitative study of 30 mixed-race participants already having or considering tattoos, Sims (2018) notes that tattoos act as a way to express one’s relationships, personal beliefs, racial authenticity, and self-identity. In their finding of racial authenticity, Sims (2018) states that participants of Native American and Chinese heritage perceived tribal tattoos and tattoos of Chinese characters on non-Chinese and non-Native persons as cultural appropriation. Participants in the study also utilized subject matter to indicate their mixed-race identities. For example, one participant used Chinese characters, a Celtic knot, and an English rose to symbolize their Chinese-Irish heritage. Although Sims (2018) demonstrates that tattoos can act as ways to connect with one’s own racial and ethnic identities, they also draw attention to the way trends in tattooing can homogenize and appropriate cultures.

Thompson (2015) also argues that society views tattooed white women as creative and tattooed women of color as deviant. Society perceives women of color as deviant and foreign without tattoos, so becoming a heavily tattooed woman of color only strengthens such associations. Thompson (2015) found that immigrant parents of heavily tattooed daughters felt

that tattoos were a negative result of Americanization thus causing conflict within the family. In Japan, tattoos are deeply associated with organized crime, thus Thompson (2015) noticed that her Asian American interviewees were far more likely to conceal their tattoos than any other race due to fear of disapproval from family members. Similarly, Latino participants reported disapproval from their family members, as one woman explained that her Catholic grandmother prays and rubs holy water on her “Satanic” tattoos (Thompson 2015).

A review of the extant literature on tattoos, stigma, and gender has shown that many men and women obtain tattoos as a means for self-expression but that societal stigmatization surrounding tattoos still lingers as noted by common associations with risk behaviors and criminality (Laumann and Derick 2006; Heywood et al. 2012; Funk and Todorov 2013). Studies show that individuals perceived tattooed men as more dominant, aggressive, and more attractive than their tattooed female counterparts and experience stigmatization to lesser degrees (Horne et al. 2007; Wohlrab et al. 2009; Galbarczyk et al. 2020; Molly and Wagstaff 2021). Unlike tattooed men, tattooed women face greater stigmatization as their friends, family members, and even coworkers call into question their beauty and character (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015; Nash 2018). Research on gender and tattoo design does show that women seek smaller, more concealable tattoos, while men seek larger tattoos in visible places (most commonly on the arms) (Laumann and Derick 2006). Furthermore, research states that heavily tattooed women resist traditional femininity by obtaining large, bold tattoos that span much of their body (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015). Moreover, when considering the race and gender of tattooed individuals, research shows that people of color often have difficulties finding tattoo artists willing to tattoo on darker skin tones (Shah 2016; Yzola 2019). Finally, women of color with tattoos face greater social sanctions than white women (Thompson 2015; Sims 2018). Such difficulty and



discrimination underscore the privilege many white tattoo collectors have within the broader tattoo culture.

Previous research on tattoos and gender has deepened sociological understandings of body modifications and their effect on individuals' lived experiences. Still, despite the many important findings, current research does not consider how ciswomen, cismen, transgender, and gender-nonconforming individuals construct and use tattoos to perform gender. Based on the existing research, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that tattooed women may indeed be resisting traditional norms of femininity. It is also possible that men may be engaging in tattoo collection as a more personalized body project. Tattooing emphasizes creativity and individuality, unlike body projects that stress traditional masculine values of strength and athleticism, like bodybuilding. In sum, research on tattoos and gender must consider how individuals across the gender spectrum construct meanings of masculinity and femininity through tattoos. Furthermore, greater qualitative research is needed to understand how individuals across the gender spectrum navigate life in a tattooed, gendered body.

## METHODS

This study aims to expand the existing research on gender and tattoos in two ways. First, my more gender-inclusive sample will allow me to analyze how tattoos facilitate the performance of gender for cisgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. Second, because my sample is not limited to cisgender men and cisgender women, I examine how individuals across the gender spectrum socially construct masculinity and femininity. The main research questions addressed in the study are: How do participants of various gender identities socially construct masculinity and femininity through their tattoos? How do the experiences of tattooed

participants differ across gender identities? And how do participants uphold dominant gender ideologies through discussing, defining, and describing their tattoos?

I conducted twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews that ranged from forty-five minutes to ninety minutes. Most interviews lasted approximately one hour long. I began conducting interviews in October 2021 and finished interviews in April 2022. In order to make participants as comfortable as possible, given the circumstances regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, I allowed participants to choose between in-person or online interviews over Zoom. Most participants (85%, n=17) preferred to meet over Zoom, as some did not live within driving distances, had busy schedules, or felt more comfortable meeting virtually. In total, I conducted only three interviews in person. During one in-person interview, a cisgender man was wearing a t-shirt, and I could clearly see his tattoos, which allowed me to probe when the conversation stagnated (What does that tattoo on your shoulder say?). However, I did not lose this advantage when interviewing on Zoom, as many participants still wore clothing in which their tattoos were visible. During Zoom interviews many participants even leaned into the camera throughout to show me their various tattoos. In terms of data, there were no noticeable differences between the information participants shared throughout Zoom or in-person interviews.

To ensure I was a respectful interviewer, I started each interview by asking participants their pronouns. After I established participants' preferred pronouns, I asked them demographic questions. Next, I asked general questions about participants' tattoos, and the last group of questions specifically addressed participants' motivations for obtaining tattoos, their possible experiences with tattoo stigma, and their overall gender performance through their tattoos. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I often probed participants with follow-up questions to gain deeper insights on particular themes they may have mentioned.

Following approval from the study location's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in October 2021, I began recruiting participants. I posted recruitment flyers detailing the study's purpose, requirements, and my contact information in various buildings and on public bulletin boards throughout the university's campus. As noted in my literature review, research on tattoos in gender-nonconforming populations remains especially limited. Bearing this in mind, I did not restrict my sampling to cismen and ciswomen because including only these two gender identities would reinforce a gender binary. Instead, I noted on my recruitment flyers that all gender identities were welcome. I also visited college classrooms to briefly explain my study and I passed out recruitment flyers to the undergraduate students. I shared my flyer with other graduate students who helped to circulate it on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Lastly, I posted recruitment flyers in local coffee shops and gave flyers to a local tattoo artist with whom I had a rapport.

As stated on the recruitment flyer, I required participants to be 18 to 35 years old, have at least two visible tattoos, and be willing to participate in an hour long in-person or Zoom interview. I conceptualized visible tattoos as those placed on the arms, legs, hands, neck, and face that can be seen in everyday clothing. Individuals interested in the study contacted me through my institutional email. At the end of each interview, I explained to participants that I was utilizing snowball sampling, a sampling method whereby the researcher encourages participants to share recruitment flyers or contact information with other individuals that fit the inclusion criteria. However, I obtained only two of my participants from snowball sampling, meaning that I recruited the majority of my sample through flyers (90%, n=18). All participants signed and returned an informed consent document before the interview began. Although I stated on the informed consent document that I would record the interviews, I asked each participant

once more for their consent to record prior to starting the interview. The informed consent document also explained that I would use pseudonyms in place of participants' names to ensure confidentiality.

To analyze my interview data, I performed open coding using the software Dedoose. This open coding entailed reading through the transcripts line-for-line and noting any themes that emerged in the data. After all the transcripts were coded, I had a total of 125 codes ranging from demographics such as gender and age to specific descriptions of tattoos like "delicate" or "thick/bold." I used Dedoose's "Code Application" and "Code Co-Occurrence" features to see what codes occurred the most and how often a given code appeared with a second code. From these features, I took note of the most significant codes and created broad themes under which to organize relevant codes. These broad themes included, but were not limited to, "Masculine Tattoos," "Feminine Tattoos," "Positive Experiences," "Negative Experiences," "Agreeability," and "Stigma." Once I established broad themes in my data, I read through all transcripts an additional three times to further refine my findings. In total, the qualitative data yielded five major findings I have titled: "Doing Hegemonic Masculinity with Ink," "Doing Emphasized Femininity with Ink," "Gendered Tattoo Stigma," "Gendered Interactions with Tattoo Artists," and "Outside the Binary."

As a researcher, I wanted to provide a comfortable and relaxed interview setting that enabled my participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding their tattoos freely. To do this, I often wore short-sleeved shirts to expose my tattoos. I have six tattoos on my left arm that are visible from most angles. I also have two tattoos that are not visible in everyday clothing: one on my ribcage and one on my neck. Showing my tattoos served to establish my personal connection to the art form and signal to participants that I was a tattoo collector like

them; I was not someone who would pass judgment nor associate tattooed participants with negative stereotypes.

In light of making my tattooed status known to participants, I recognize my insider status has limitations. I acknowledge that my own experiences as a tattooed cisgender woman has the potential to bias the way I understand and interpret the data provided by participants.

Additionally, participants with fewer visible tattoos than me may have felt unsure of their value to the study. With these limitations in mind, I assured all interviewees that their participation in the study was important, and I thanked them for their time. Ultimately, though, I feel that my tattooed status allowed me to connect more deeply with participants, use language typically found within tattoo culture, and establish a more conversational tone with interviewees overall.

My sample is comprised of 20 tattooed individuals; eight cisgender men (40%), eight cisgender women (40%), and four gender-nonconforming participants (20%). Within the gender-nonconforming group, three participants are nonbinary, and one participant is a transgender man. I recognize transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals have varied and nuanced experiences with regard to gender, however, I chose to use the term gender-nonconforming as a way to succinctly refer to this group. While writing about these gender-nonconforming participants in my findings I specifically refer to their self-identified gender and use their preferred pronouns. Most of my sample participants are white (90%, n=18). Two cisgender men in my study self-identified as non-white; one cisman stated he was Hispanic but clarified he preferred to use Mexican, and a second cisman identified as Middle Eastern. Table 1 below shows a comprehensive list of participants.

As previously noted, my inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two visible tattoos. The participants in my sample had an average of 12 tattoos. Three participants

had four tattoos (one cisman, two ciswomen), and another three participants had 30 tattoos (one nonbinary person, two cismen). The number of tattoos participants had ranged from the study minimum to a maximum of 35. However, all individuals in my study report having plans for future tattoos, so it is likely participants will continue their tattoo journeys.

**TABLE 1:** Sample Demographics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Total Tattoos</i>
Gabby	CW	31	White	10
Ryan	CM	22	Middle eastern	6
David	CM	24	Mexican	4
Morgan	CW	27	White	7
Sam	Nonbinary	28	White	10
John	CM	32	White	8
Ashley	CW	34	White	14
Charlie	Nonbinary	32	White	30
Laura	CW	29	White	2
James	CM	26	White	9
Nick	CM	24	White	3
Rachel	CW	21	White	4
Max	Transman	29	White	5
Olivia	CW	20	White	2
Connor	CM	31	White	30
Rick	CM	31	White	30
Chloe	CW	24	White	4
Liz	CW	30	White	7
Taylor	Nonbinary	20	White	15
Luke	CM	23	White	35

## FINDINGS

### DOING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY WITH INK: *Heterosexuality, Aggression, and Toughness*

In answering my first research question (How do participants of various gender identities socially construct masculinity and femininity within tattoos?) I found that participants shared unified constructions of masculinity and femininity within tattoos. In particular, participants across the gender spectrum characterized masculine tattoos as having bold lines and animal

motifs. For example, one nonbinary participant, Sam (28-years-old, ten tattoos), explained: “I guess I would classify masculine tattoos like thick, heavy lines versus organic lines, like greenery or florals.” Similarly, when asked how his identity as a cisman may have influenced his taste for tattoos, 31-year-old Connor with 30 tattoos, stated: “I guess if you look at it in like the style of tattoos I get [...] they're more, like, masculine in a way. I got like chains and tigers and snakes. I guess classic symbols that would kind of represent masculinity in a way.” From Connor’s perspective, his tattoos were masculine because they resembled “classic symbols” of masculinity.

Likewise, when asked how his tattoos may relate to his gender identity, Luke, a 23-year-old cisman with 35 tattoos, stated his tattoo of a shark was masculine because “a shark is like an aggressive animal.” Many of my participants, including Ryan, Rick, Morgan, Liz, James, John, Charlie, Max, and various others, agreed with Sam, Luke, and Connor’s ideas that tattoos with bold lines and animal motifs were characteristically masculine. My findings support those of Burgess and Clark (2010), who noted men and women participants grouped and defined tattoos with thick black lines as aggressive and bold. However, my study expands these findings to include gender-nonconforming individuals who also constructed masculine tattoos like their cisgender counterparts.

Throughout my interviews with cismen, I found that many performed and upheld dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity through their tattoos. Specifically, seven out of the eight cismen in my study discussed, described, and told stories about their tattoos centered on heterosexuality, aggression, and toughness. For example, John (cisgender, heterosexual), explained that he acquired a tattoo as a memorial to his close friend. As time went on, John received negative comments from his peers. John said:

He died when I was 17 and I got his name tattooed on me a few months later. [...] And then everybody thought it was my boyfriend. Like, “Oh, is that your boyfriend?” and I’m like, “No, but if it was, who cares?” So then I got a cross around his name too. That was my second tattoo because everybody made fun of me.

John intended to memorialize his friend with a tattoo, but people around John used his tattoo as grounds for jokes about his sexuality. In response, John asked the rhetorical question “No, but if it was [his boyfriend’s name], who cares?” implying that he did not have an issue with the mocking and jokes. However, it is evident the comments bothered John. So much so, that he modified his tattoo to reassert his heterosexuality. As gender scholars theorize, male same-sex attraction is “counter-hegemonic” because it is considered effeminate, and as a result, hostility towards gay men is deeply embedded in heterosexuality (Donaldson 1993; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Therefore, jokes about John’s sexuality based on his tattoo sought to undermine his hegemonic masculinity. When I asked a follow-up question about what John’s tattoo looked like with the additional cross he explained:

It's like a cross made out of dog tags because he was murdered, killed. And it was kind of just like a, again I was like 17, 18 years old, like, how do I make people stop calling this my boyfriend? Well, he was killed. He was shot. Maybe it was like he was a soldier, [so I chose] dog tags. That's where my brain went. And it looks nice. It's a good tattoo. But yeah, it was more of like showing how this person's dead, everyone he's dead. He's not my boyfriend.

For John, the addition of the cross made out of dog tags reasserted his heterosexuality and enabled him to perform hegemonic masculinity. Despite the fact that John’s friend was not a soldier, John chose a cross made out of dog tags to conjure a sense of traditional masculinity; when people saw John’s dog tag tattoo, they would likely assume it was a memorial to a man who died in the military. Through his experiences with homophobic jokes, and in describing his thought process to me, John evoked motifs of masculinity (the fallen soldier) and performed hegemonic masculinity by reaffirming his own heterosexuality.



Similarly, Sam (a nonbinary participant with ten tattoos) constructed hegemonic masculinity in tattoos in terms of heterosexuality. However, Sam detailed how their family “joked” with their brother:

My brother actually has a guardian angel tattoo on his shoulder. It's very masculine. He's in the army, and it's funny to joke around because the tattoo looks like his friend from college. “[Friend’s name] is your guardian angel. How cute.” You know, and it's a little bit too, you know, homo-erotic for him, for us to even say it like that. It's funny.

Although Sam does not perform hegemonic masculinity here, they link heterosexuality to hegemonic masculinity. Sam and their family joked that their brother’s tattoo resembled a friend of his from college and attribute homoeroticism to intimate male camaraderie. Sam’s brother perceived the joke as destabilizing his hegemonic masculinity because it is “homo-erotic.” Though Sam did add the caveat that their brother’s tattoo is “very masculine,” they still upheld the notion that male same-sex attraction is counter-hegemonic. As a result, Sam’s brother must shrug off jokes about his tattoo and reaffirm his heterosexuality to maintain his hegemonic masculinity.

Quantitative studies from Wohlrab et al. (2009) and Galbarczyk et al. (2020) established that participants perceived tattooed cismen as more dominant and aggressive. Donaldson (1993) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) theorize that dominance and aggression are pathways through which men pursue hegemonic masculinity. Considering these themes, I found that many tattooed individuals described their tattoos as masculine because they depicted “aggressive” animals. As previously mentioned, Connor described his chain, tiger, and snake tattoos as classic symbols of masculinity. Similar to this sentiment, Ryan (a 22-year-old cisman with six tattoos), expressed that his wolf and sheepdog tattoo was part of a larger gender ideology of aggression, fighting, and family protection. Ryan said:

So, the sheepdog and wolf back-to-back is the ideology of, you know, there are actually three different types of people in the world. You have sheep, sheepdog, and the wolf. I don't have a sheep or anything like that. But I always think that sheepdog and the wolf kind of fight back between each other, that's why they're back-to-back on [my arm]. And it's kind of on the ideology... Let's say you are protecting your family you're going to be the sheepdog. But, you know, if you hunt someone down for hurting your family, you're kind of turning into a wolf. So that's kind of the ideology on that.

Ryan drew specifically on a hegemonically masculine ideology; the man of the family must fight to protect his loved ones. Ryan framed his tattoo as aggressive when he explained that “[hunting] someone down for hurting your family” transformed a man from a sheepdog to a wolf.

Moreover, Ryan clarified that the inspiration for his tattoo typically included a sheep (a passive, docile animal), but he chose to exclude the sheep in his tattoo. Thus, Ryan used his tattoo to perform hegemonic masculinity by likening himself to the aggressive animal: the wolf. Ryan also upheld the notion that familial protection is a marker of masculinity.

Similar to Ryan, James (a 26-year-old cisman with nine tattoos), linked his tattoos to hegemonic masculinity through notions of aggression. James stated: “I suppose in a way [my tattoos] would tend to have themes of [pauses]... maybe there has been an aggressive progression in the past of my life, or that I aspire to these virtues or this warrior-type behavior.” Like Ryan, James highlighted aggression through “warrior-type behavior[s].” Though not explicitly stated, James' tattoos also fall in line with those typically characterized as masculine by study participants; James' tattoos depicted bold black lines, and one of his tattoos displayed a growling bear. Thus, James performed hegemonic masculinity through his tattoos by using them to represent his pursuit of “warrior-type behavior[s].” Moreover, only cismen discussed themes of aggression when I asked how their gender identity influenced their tattoos

Common among cismen, but not limited to them, was the idea of doing hegemonic masculinity through toughness. Throughout our interview, 31-year-old Rick emphasized how

many hours he had “under the needle.” Rick said that he sat for over 50 cumulative hours for his leg sleeve. In terms of toughness, Rick stated:

I know both male, female, nonbinary, everyone has tattoos, you know, all genders. But from my perspective, I think the hurt would kind of signify the bravado or macho-ness behind getting a tattoo. [...] And I've actually had a buddy text me recently and make a negative comment about the sunset [background], saying that it looks a little wimpy. And I said, “I don't care,” I'm like, “That's what I want on my leg, man.” And to each their own, you know. I made a comment back, I said, “I'm sure you're going to get a heart on your chest that says, ‘I love my mom.’” [...] And my response to him is he's never even, he doesn't even have any tattoos. I like, honestly, I think the manliest part, or the most macho part is getting the tattoo put on you. You know, not necessarily what you get put on you because everything is representative in its own way to the person who's getting it. But I don't think, knowing this [friend], I've known him for 26 years, I don't think that he could get a tattoo on the back of his knee. You know? But I'm not going to say that to him because then it becomes a back and forth.

Indeed, Rick acknowledged that individuals across the gender spectrum pursued tattoos for personal reasons, but he believed there is an inherent “macho-ness behind getting a tattoo.” Rick stressed that the pain associated with the process of tattooing is the “manliest part.” Additionally, Rick's conversations with his longtime friend underscored the idea that toughness is also tied to the *type* of tattoo one gets. As Rick noted, his friend made a negative comment about the colorful sunset that acted as the background to his leg sleeve. In particular, Rick's friend called the sunset “wimpy” and inadvertently called into question Rick's masculinity. Rick responded by using toughness to defend his masculinity: “And my response to him is he's never even, he doesn't even have any tattoos [...] I don't think that he could get a tattoo on the back of his knee.” Rick also framed a heart tattoo with the words “I love my mom” as less masculine than his sunset tattoo. In this interaction, Rick performed hegemonic masculinity by reaffirming his ability to withstand the pain of a tattoo and undermining tattoos that expressed love.

John, a 32-year-old cisman with eight tattoos, also used his tattoos to perform hegemonic masculinity through toughness. John explained:

I know a lot of guys like wouldn't get a girl's face on their arm because it's like, "Oh, that's girly" or like flowers or colors. But you know, I also got a huge tribal tattoo. So maybe when I was 18, I was like, "I got to look tough when I get tattoos," but I never intended anything like that to be like, "This has to be manly."

First, John described feminine tattoos in opposition to masculine tattoos. To John, a feminine tattoo was "girly," colorful, and portrayed floral imagery. In comparison, John implied that his "huge tribal tattoo," a tattoo style characterized by thick lines and shapes, was masculine.

Second, John expressed that he acquired his tribal tattoo to "look tough." While John did state that he never consciously chose tattoos to look "manly," he did explain that he wanted to look tough when he started his tattoo collection. John saw tribal tattoos as a way to achieve toughness and pursue hegemonic masculinity.

I also found that two ciswomen and one gender-nonconforming participant mentioned themes of toughness in their interviews. Morgan, a ciswoman, explained that her American-traditional style tattoos elicited a feeling of toughness in her:

When I got the one on my forearm, the eagle, because it's a more traditional tattoo and it is pretty big, and it did hurt, [laughs] the first like six months I had it I felt like so *badass* all the time. And I was just like, "Yeah, I did this." [...] I mean like I said, my tattoos are bolder, they're more traditional. They're the tattoo style have on their arms and their legs, too. [...] I would say that especially the eagle on my arm, that felt like I was *tough*.

Morgan conveyed a sense of toughness by emphasizing both the pain and style of her tattoos.

More specifically Morgan noted her eagle tattoo is "pretty big" and explains that "it did hurt," indicating that her ability to tolerate the pain made her feel "so badass." Morgan also described her tattoos as American-traditional, a style of tattooing historically seen among "old bikers," sailors, and blue-collar workers (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). It is also important to note that Morgan explicitly characterized her tattoos as "very masculine." Through enduring the pain of a large tattoo, especially in a style historically defined as masculine, Morgan constructed

masculinity by feeling tough. Likewise, Taylor, a 20-year-old nonbinary participant with 15 tattoos, said:

I feel like- it's kind of weird to say out loud, but I feel like I look cooler. Also, I definitely think I look a little bit... I wouldn't say scarier, but like my friends have said that before to me. They're like, "You don't look approachable." Yeah okay, I mean I guess that's fair. But like, yeah, I don't know, I like that, so I don't really mind.

Taylor did not specifically use the word tough, but they explained they enjoyed the toughness their tattoos afforded them. For instance, Taylor's friends tell them they "don't look approachable." However, Taylor found joy in the fact that they look "scarier." Much like Morgan, toughness was a feeling Taylor experienced from being tattooed. Morgan, who identifies as a ciswoman, and Taylor, who identifies as nonbinary, cannot perform hegemonic masculinity because their self-identified genders render them subordinate within the gender hierarchy. Still, Morgan and Taylor constructed a broad understanding of masculinity in their own tattoos. While participants like Rick and John explained that they used tattoos to uphold their masculine toughness, Morgan and Taylor felt tough as a result of their tattoos. Therefore, Rick and John used their body projects to establish and maintain a sense of toughness that would bolster their hegemonic masculinity. In comparison, Morgan and Taylor did not attempt to prove toughness with their body projects. Instead, their feelings of toughness arose after they obtained their tattoos.

Throughout the interviews, participants broadly constructed masculinity in terms of tattoo motifs (aggressive animals) and styles (thick, bold lines). Ciswomen performed hegemonic masculinity through themes of heterosexuality, aggression, and toughness through their tattoos. In addition, two ciswomen and two nonbinary participants experienced toughness as a result of their tattoos, but they did not use tattoos to achieve toughness as ciswomen did. By viewing

masculinity through a holistic lens, I was able to understand how study participants across the gender spectrum characterized, defined, and presented masculinity through tattoos.

#### DOING EMPHASIZED FEMININITY WITH INK: *Delicate, Concealable, and Essentialized*

##### *Delicate*

While participants in the study consistently constructed masculine tattoos as bold, they simultaneously constructed feminine tattoos as delicate. Atkinson's (2002) qualitative study documented that many ciswomen performed femininity through their use of floral, celestial, and small animal and insect tattoos. While I did find that ciswomen like Laura, Rachel, and Chloe had such designs, what was more striking in the interviews was the way that participants across the gender spectrum constructed feminine tattoos in opposition to masculine tattoos. While participants constructed masculine tattoos as bold and depicting aggressive animals, they constructed feminine tattoos as small, delicate, and depicting flowers. For example, when asked how his gender identity as a cisman may have influenced the types of tattoos he got, Rick stated:

Yeah, I guess, like I wouldn't get certain tattoos because I feel like they are a little too feminine. Like I wouldn't get a bunch of roses or sunflowers on my arm or anything like that. Not that, you know, I would shame somebody as a man for doing that. That's their style. But I have a very basic...I don't want to say I'm going too hardcore, but, you know, this is my statue arm, portraits, and then I kind of want to do Japanese art on this arm. And I'm sure some of that will actually look more feminine than manly because I'm probably going to talk to [my tattoo artist] about color, depending on how this arm feels black and grey wise.

In this excerpt, Rick clearly constructed feminine tattoos as ones that display floral imagery, such as roses or sunflowers. Rick also distanced himself from such feminized designs by saying, "I wouldn't get certain tattoos because I feel like they are a little too feminine." Although Rick clarified that he would not judge other men who got these feminized designs, he still implied that feminine tattoos do not fit in with his "basic" masculine style. First, Rick constructed feminine tattoos in opposition to masculine tattoos, and second, he performed his own masculinity by *not*

selecting designs that he deemed “a little too feminine.” Rick also implicitly constructed feminine tattoos as more colorful when he said, “I’m sure some of that will actually look more feminine than manly because I’m probably going to talk to [my tattoo artist] about color.” Rick implied that the addition of bright colors to a black and grey tattoo might make the tattoo “look more feminine than manly.” Likewise, Sam also agreed that color feminized tattoos: “I do equate color with more feminine [tattoos].” Although participants like John, Rick, and Sam expressed the idea that colorful tattoos are more feminine, some participants expressed that having color or black and grey tattoos was simply a matter of preference. Still, in the case of John, Rick, and Sam, these participants linked colorful tattoos to femininity.

During my interview with Rachel, a 21-year-old ciswoman with four tattoos, she recalled an experience where a tattoo artist had possibly misread her emails or simply not read them at all. However, in telling this story Rachel actively constructed her tattoos as “gentle” and “flowery”—coded words for feminine. Rachel said:

I think like my own style is like a little bit flowery and like, like more gentle, I guess. And like, not super harsh. [...] I went to this one [tattoo artist] who like, he had really like wonderful tattoos in his portfolio on his website and like, so did all the artists at the shop. So, I went there for a consult for my sleeve [...] and like, I sent him all the same pictures that I've been sending everyone else, they're all like flowery and like, you know, like frilly and stuff. And then I got there and he's like, “Yeah, I'm kind of thinking like a dragon with like flames coming off the elbows and so much shading,” and he is like showing me these pictures and I'm like, “Oh God,” [...] I was just so surprised because I'm like, “You're all looking at me,” I'm like, “Is this really what we're all envisioning for me right now?”

Rachel felt as though the design that the tattoo artist had shown her did not align with her “frilly” style. Rachel wanted a tattoo that was “not super harsh,” but the tattoo artist drew a more masculine tattoo. When Rachel saw the design, she questioned her own performance of emphasized femininity: ““You're all looking at me [...] Is this really what we're all envisioning for me right now?”” Rachel was especially confused by the miscommunication; she presented

feminine and sent “frilly” reference photos, so why had the artist not delivered that type of design? In this example, Rachel constructed feminine tattoos as ones with flowers and thinner lines. Tattoos with dragons and heavy shading did not fit Rachel’s construction of feminine tattoos. In addition to this construction of femininity, Rachel expressed that she extended her gender presentation as a ciswoman through her tattoos. She believed her preexisting “gentle” tattoos were enough to inform the artist of what style she wanted.

Similar to Rachel’s construction of feminine tattoos, Laura (29-year-old ciswoman, two tattoos), explained that she noticed a similar style of tattooing in feminine presenting people like herself:

And I think, like I would not be like my brother and get like a bunch of skulls or the Pennywise clown. I just don't really want that on my body because I don't know if I love what that says about me. [...] And I think...delicate feels like not the right word but it kind of is for the style of tattooing that I see on a lot of women. I don't know if I see a lot of women or femme presenting people have like the American [traditional] style. I think it's much more...[pauses] You'll have a floral, you'll have a little whale.

Though Laura did not want to describe the tattoos of other ciswomen and femme presenting people as “delicate,” she still constructed femininity in line with these characteristics. Laura stated that ciswomen and femme-presenting people did not typically have bold, American-traditional style tattoos. Instead, Laura constructed feminine tattoos as having floral designs and designs smaller in size like “a little whale.” Similarly, Charlie (32-years-old, nonbinary) also described feminine tattoos as flower-centric and often containing “flowy stuff.”

Morgan, who was once a tattoo shop manager, also recognized a theme of delicacy in femme-presenting people’s tattoos. As she recounted her time spent working in a femme-centered tattoo shop, Morgan noticed:

It seemed that a lot of the women or femme presenting people would get something that was maybe a little more modest in size, or something that was a little bit easier to cover up. And then if they did have a lot of tattoos, they’d usually do something that was more



delicate looking. And then men would come in and they'd want their first tattoo to be [exaggerates her voice to sound lower] a chest piece of a lion with a dagger. So, yeah, it seemed like men were very much more so go big or go home.

Like Laura, Morgan constructed masculine and feminine tattoos in opposition to one another. For example, Morgan described a feminine tattoo as “something that was maybe a little more modest in size, or something that was a little bit easier to cover up,” whereas a masculine tattoo was “a chest piece of a lion with a dagger.” Also, Morgan highlighted the stark differences in the types of tattoos that ciswomen and femme individuals received in comparison to cismen. Morgan observed that ciswomen and femme individuals wanted something “more delicate looking,” while cismen wanted a bold, aggressive tattoo like a lion with a dagger through its head, a common American-traditional motif. As previously noted, Morgan constructed her own tattoos as masculine and derived a sense of toughness from them. However, in this excerpt, Morgan constructed feminine tattoos by describing ciswomen and femme individuals' tattoos as “delicate” and smaller in size.

Just as I found ciswomen and gender-nonconforming participants constructed masculinity, I found that Connor, a cisman, constructed femininity through his tattoos. When he described the style of his tattoos, Connor said:

I kind of wanted it both ways where it's like I have a masculine image of a tiger but done in like a fine line way. Not like super dark and traditional, where they're just like blasted on me, but it's kind of a little more delicate and approachable. So I kind of like the idea of having these tough images that are also soft at the same time.

Connor explained that he wanted a “masculine image of a tiger,” but instead of having his tattoo in the traditional, bold style, he wanted it to be more delicate. In this construction of gender, Connor defined his tattoos as masculine (the tiger as an aggressive animal) but noted his tattoos has a more delicate, feminized style. Connor also spoke in our interview about his “name-brand mentality” when it came to tattoos. He said: “It's kind of like a name-brand mentality in a way.

It's like, 'Oh, that's more expensive, and that's a city that's known for it? It must be better.'" In other words, he sought out expensive tattoo artists with large social media followings in an effort to stylize his masculine tattoos. Connor, a physically fit, heterosexual, white cisman had the resources to curate a unique style of masculine tattoos in feminized ways. Still, Connor constructed masculinity and femininity within tattoos as distinctly different. To Connor, masculine tattoos were not "soft," but he "wanted [his tattoo] both ways." Therefore, Connor upheld the construction of masculine tattoos as depicting aggressive animals and feminine tattoos as delicate and soft.

### *Concealable*

Nearly two-thirds (63%, n=5) of the ciswomen in the study reported that they actively considered tattoo placement in terms of concealability. In other words, most ciswomen I interviewed put their tattoos on areas of the body they could easily cover by clothing or hair. My findings support those of previous research documenting that ciswomen are more likely to obtain tattoos in discreet places (Atkinson 2002; Laumann and Derick 2006). However, I extend such findings to further examine how ciswomen's body projects upheld emphasized femininity. Scholars theorize that emphasized femininity exists in tandem with hegemonic femininity; emphasized femininity complies with and accommodates a subordinated gender relationship with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2019). In considering these gender frameworks, I found that ciswomen performed emphasized femininity by concealing their tattoos and complying with gender subordination. While a visible tattoo posed no threat to cismen's hegemonic masculinity, an overtly visible tattoo posed a risk to ciswomen's performance of femininity, especially when layered with professionalism. As previous research has established, society views large, visible tattoos as threats to cultural norms of femininity

(Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015). Therefore, ciswomen performed emphasized femininity by electing to place their tattoos in areas they could easily cover. I also found that ciswomen used tattoos to frame parts of the biologically female body. In these cases, ciswomen complied with the objectification of their feminine bodies and performed emphasized femininity by accentuating sexualized aspects of the female body, like the breasts.

One ciswoman, Gabby (31-years-old, ten tattoos) explained that her mother and adults in her mother's generation upheld an idealized form of femininity that centered on normative body expectations. As Gabby puts it, her mother believed, "Oh, this is our little girl and she's going to grow up and she's going to play dress up, wear dresses, and wear high heels. Her skin's going to be clear, no tattoos because that's purity, that's whiteness." This sentiment illuminated the larger cultural belief that becoming a heavily tattooed ciswoman is transgressive to femininity (Thompson 2015). Gabby's recollection of her mother's feelings toward tattoos also underscored the unequal relationship between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Tattoos did not threaten hegemonic masculinity, as I discovered many cismen used tattoos to uphold hegemonic masculinity, yet ciswomen thoroughly considered the placement of their tattoos in order to perform emphasized femininity.

Additionally, Gabby noted that her mother's beliefs also had racial implications ("no tattoos because that's purity, that's whiteness"). Thompson (2015) argues that society views tattooed white ciswomen as creative but associates tattooed ciswomen of color with deviance and foreignness. Although Gabby's mom was unhappy with Gabby's tattooed status and sanctioned her for it, she still endorsed a beauty standard that privileges whiteness above other racial and ethnic identities. In an effort to adhere to this beauty standard, Gabby performed emphasized femininity by getting smaller tattoos in locations she could hide. However, I also found another

dimension to concealability and emphasized femininity: professionalism. For example, Gabby said:

I think when I first started getting tattoos, so when I was 18, my process was much different. I just kind of, at first I was really concerned actually about placement in regards to like a career. I was told, or modeled, that having tattoos that are visible, wearing business casual attire, is like a sure-fire way to never work. So my first tattoo placement was like above elbow- on the inside above my elbow [points to arm] like in this area. Because I was like “Oh, I can wear a long-sleeved shirt—no one will see it” or whatever. And then after that was when I started getting the rib tattoos because I figured again, no one could see it. I was also hiding my tattoos from my parents, so my [mom] wouldn't see them. As I got older, it was more about what was aesthetically pleasing to me and how I wanted to work it into a fashion statement I guess I would say. So that's when I started filling out the rest of my arm, and not really caring if a job asked me to cover it.

As Gabby explained, the cultural norms of femininity, which her mother modeled, also matter in terms of her professionalism. Earlier in her body project, Gabby chose areas that were less visible and devised strategies to cover her tattoos when needed. As she explained, she could simply “wear a long-sleeved shirt.” Gabby stated that having visible tattoos while in a professional setting is a “sure-fire way to never work.” In contrast, no cismen relayed experiences where peers told them that tattoos were unprofessional. In fact, some cismen, like law enforcement officer Ryan, noted that their workplaces had no issue with tattoos. Therefore, during the early years of Gabby's tattoo journey, she performed emphasized femininity by presenting her skin as clear and unmodified while at work. In other words, Gabby maintained and complied with cultural norms of femininity that reinforced tattoos as detrimental to beauty and professionalism.

Only recently did Liz (30-years-old, seven tattoos) begin getting more visible tattoos. Liz recalled an experience while in law school that linked emphasized femininity to concealability and professionalism.

I went to law school in the South, and I would say concealability there on tattoos it's a bit more, definitely a regional thing somewhat in this country we're in. And I had a law

school professor tell me, tell my whole class that we should wear, women should wear skirts to court because judges like that more. And I about fell out of my chair. So, and that was I mean, I graduated law school in 2017. So, we are talking about recent.

Here, Liz juxtaposed tattoo concealability with beliefs about how women lawyers should dress, especially those in Southern areas of the United States. Furthermore, during our interview, Liz explained that concealability was “100 percent” a part of her process when planning a tattoo. Liz also painted a larger picture of doing emphasized femininity in a professional setting. Liz performed emphasized femininity by concealing her tattoos and dressing professionally in a male-dominated field that demanded her compliance with subordinated gender dynamics. Although Liz joked that she wears pants to court she still made efforts to conceal her tattoos and maintain her femininity.

Liz’s husband, Rick, who was also interviewed for the study, further reiterated Liz’s performance of emphasized femininity: “I think honestly, like females get more of a negative connotation with [tattoos] than males do. Like my significant other has seven tattoos, and she doesn’t have any on her arms at all because she doesn’t want there to be any sort of negative connotation that comes with it, so. And she’s a lawyer.” According to Rick, tattoos on female-bodied individuals, like Liz, have a greater negative connotation than they do on male-bodied individuals. Rick noted that Liz performed emphasized femininity by concealing her tattoos, and he also implied that her tattoos posed a risk to both her professionalism and femininity.

Similarly, John also said of his wife:

She definitely has gone for the smaller tattoos, too. She wants them all to be kind of hidden. So, she has one on her wrist that can be hidden by her watches or like her bracelets. She has one on her back of her neck, which her hair covers. She has like two on like her lower hip, which is like covered by shirts and pants. And then she has one on her foot, so all of her tattoos are easily hidden.

John described his wife as choosing “smaller tattoos” and mentioned that she “wants them all to be kind of hidden.” John’s acknowledgment of his wife’s decision-making process of where to place tattoos points to the way that ciswomen reproduce emphasized femininity through tattoos. Unlike heavily tattooed ciswomen that seek to transgress femininity (Thompson 2015), John’s wife, like Liz and a younger Gabby, sought to engage in tattoo culture without risking their accepted femininity. Therefore, ciswomen reproduced emphasized femininity to accommodate a dynamic that allows ciswomen to obtain tattoos in visible places and prevents them from doing so.

Laura, a 29-year-old cis ciswoman who has two tattoos on her arm, also told a story about a friend (ciswoman) that she believed could be explained by gender. Laura said: “I think if there was a time that it’s gendered, I had one of my closest friends, her family kind of flipped out when she got a tattoo. To the point that was like a topic of conversation like when she got married, like if the dress was going to cover the tattoo or not.” Although Laura’s story is not about her own experiences performing gender, it does highlight the dominant cultural norms that to be feminine one must be pure and have clear skin, as Gabby’s mother stated. Laura explained that her friend received backlash from family members about her tattoo due to such femininity norms. Laura’s friend defied emphasized femininity because she obtained a tattoo in a visible place. The placement of the tattoo provoked her family to “[flip] out” and question if her wedding dress would cover it. Laura’s friend did not perform emphasized femininity because she challenged the subordinated tattoo dynamic instead of accommodating it. By obtaining a tattoo in a visible place, Laura’s friend refused to conform to a subordinated gender dynamic that forced her to weigh the gendered consequences of her tattoo placement. Moreover, the friend’s family members implied that visible tattoos threatened ciswomen’s beauty; I explore such beliefs in greater detail in the next section titled “Gendered Tattooed Stigma.”

Even Morgan, a ciswoman with self-described “masculine” tattoos, recalled concealability as the deciding factor in the placement of her first tattoo. Morgan told me: “My first tattoo was on the back of my neck, and it’s probably a little smaller than a playing card. I got that one because I mean for personal reasons, but also, I could hide it if I wanted to.” Morgan’s decision to put her tattoo in a place she “could hide if [she] wanted to,” underscored the importance of gender performance and tattoos. Reserving the ability to hide her tattoo allowed Morgan to remain feminine.

Throughout interviews, ciswomen explicitly noted that at one point or another they planned and placed their tattoos in areas they could conceal. There was also an additional layer of professionalism woven into the way that they performed femininity with regard to tattoos. To appear professional, tattooed ciswomen concealed their tattoos and performed emphasized femininity. This finding was unique to ciswomen, as no cismen factored in the concealability of their tattoos. For example, when David, a cisman, explained his thought process behind his tattoos that read “life is short” on one wrist and “fuck it” on the other wrist, he made no mention of ensuring his tattoos could be concealed. Instead, David wanted these tattoos in a visible place where he could always see them. In sum, ciswomen felt the need to plan their tattoos in accordance with emphasized femininity as a way to comply with the subordination of tattooed women.

### *Essentialized*

Three ciswomen and one nonbinary participant also discussed performing emphasized femininity with tattoos by framing the physical parts of biologically female bodies. Ashley, a 34-year-old ciswoman with 14 tattoos, typically chose her tattoo designs based on her favorite animated television shows. However, Ashley explained that an owl tattoo located under her

breasts was her “most feminine looking” tattoo due to its ornate design and placement. When asked how her tattoos may relate to her identity as a ciswoman, Ashley responded with:

The only one would be the under-boob tattoo. Like, that's the only one because clearly, it frames a part of my body that is like specific to my at least sex assigned at birth, but otherwise [shakes head]. And I think I appreciate how times have changed in that I am someone who is very much, I have been aware of the fact that I have a masculine energy for a good portion of my life and for a long time I tried to really push that out. I don't anymore.

Ashley asserted that her “under-boob” tattoo is her only feminine tattoo because it framed her breasts. Here, Ashley drew a clear connection between femininity and the sexualized parts of the biologically female body. Ashley stated that she has “been aware of the fact that [she has] a masculine energy”, but she initially rejected this aspect of her personality. In trying to reject her masculine energy, Ashley used her ornate feminine tattoo to perform emphasized femininity. Ashley's tattoo placement enabled her to reject her masculine personality and conform to the patriarchal belief idea that her female body was to be accentuated through tattoos.

Morgan also discussed how tattoos on her physical body aided in gender performance. Morgan explained that placing masculine tattoos on her feminine body subsequently feminized her tattoos. Morgan stated:

I think that [tattoos] make sense with my gender, because I have like, and I've thought about this, I think that there's a juxtaposition between the “masculinity” [used air quotes] in my tattoos and the femininity of my body. Because I have more shapely legs and a smaller waist, so I have a feminine body, but then I have these very masculine tattoos which I think makes sense for my gender and the way I present my femininity which isn't super, super hyper-feminine.

Despite the fact that Morgan constructed her tattoos as masculine due to their bold, animal-centric designs, she explained that her female body feminizes them. More specifically, Morgan highlighted that the tattoos on her body became feminized through placement on her “shapely



legs” and “smaller waist.” Similarly, Gabby detailed that the placement of tattoos can support the performance of emphasized femininity:

I think what I'm first thinking about is the physical body and your form. So, I guess there are some tattoos that really follow or emphasize a form, or like, they're in a position where if I were the type of person that would wear a super low-cut dress or whatever, then they would be visible. You know, I'm just thinking of the little woman who wears the black dress to a club and like a man sees a peak of a tattoo and is like, “Wow, that's a bad girl” or whatever. Like that to me I guess, like some of my tattoos are in certain positions where I guess that could be the takeaway. Otherwise, like I think having a full sleeve has been interesting as far as... I think it's because a lot of the people that I've seen with full sleeves, like my brother, or just people in general have been men or male presenting.

As Gabby explained, placing tattoos on areas that are typically sexualized by society aids in gender performance. To Gabby, such placements do gender by sending a signal that “that's a bad girl.” If good girls are “pure” and conceal any tattoos they may have, ciswomen with tattoos in sexualized areas are “bad girls” who perform femininity by complying with gendered objectification. Additionally, Gabby illuminated an interesting point; the “bad girl” is still an acceptable form of femininity, whereas the girl who neither conceals nor places tattoos in sexualized areas risks her performance of femininity since she challenges the gender dynamic.

By emphasizing routinely sexualized parts of the female body with tattoos, participants essentialized gender to sex and linked femininity to body parts like the breasts, narrow waists, and “shapely” legs. Participants also communicated that placing tattoos in sexualized areas of their bodies feminized the look of their tattoos and allowed them to perform emphasized femininity as a tattooed ciswoman in a more acceptable way. Unspoken in these narratives is the way that patriarchy and the male gaze work to uphold such beliefs of emphasized and essentialized femininity. No cismen in the study essentialized their masculinity through tattoos on physical parts of the male body. Moreover, no cismen accommodated a subordinated gender

dynamic as their hegemonic masculinity privileged their tattooed bodies over tattooed ciswomen's bodies.

### GENDERED TATTOO STIGMA: *Father-Daughter Dynamics and Double Standards*

Previous research has established that tattooed ciswomen face a unique gendered stigma that routinely ties their beauty to worth and simultaneously calls into question the motives and meanings behind becoming a tattooed ciswoman (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015). However, few qualitative studies utilize a sample with both ciswomen and cismen, as well as gender-nonconforming individuals, to understand how this gendered tattoo stigma holds up across gender identities. While interviewing participants, I found that the gendered tattoo stigma was more nuanced than previously discussed in research studies. In particular, this gendered tattoo stigma operated through father-daughter dynamics and double standards between ciswomen and cismen family members. In total, seven out of eight tattooed ciswomen reported experiences with a gendered tattoo stigma that were distinct from tattooed cismen and gender-nonconforming individuals.

#### *Father-Daughter Dynamics*

Several tattooed ciswomen reported experiences of gendered stigma through interactions with fathers who held a strong dislike for tattoos and made such dislike known through harsh comments. For instance, Ashley explained: "Yeah, I was definitely someone who cared about my dad's approval at that point and knew he would despise me. Well, he had once said, 'Women look like trash who have tattoos.' That sticks in your head." By describing tattooed ciswomen as looking like "trash," Ashley's father reinforced the idea that tattoos are a non-normative body project for ciswomen that lessens ciswomen's beauty and worth. Perhaps more striking is

Ashley's use of the word "despise." Ashley was certain her father would hate her because of her tattoos. Ashley continued:

Well, even after [getting married], my dad said to me, and I'm getting divorced now, and I don't even care. But my dad said, "Well, God forbid if anything happened to [her soon-to-be ex-husband]..." I was like, "What? What? What's going to happen?" [and he replied] "What if people don't want to be with you because of your tattoos?" I was like, "All right." For me, that's like a weeding-out process. Yeah, I know for the better.

Ashley's father not only expressed his dislike for tattoos on ciswomen but also reinforced the dominant gender ideology that heterosexual marriage is crucial to being a ciswoman and that within such marriages, husbands *choose* ciswomen based on beauty. Ashley's father implied that her tattoos would somehow devalue her worth as a wife and make her less desirable to a future partner. However, Ashley's response to her father's comments demonstrated that her tattoos functioned as a mechanism to "weed out" a partner who may not like them.

Like Ashley, Morgan, noted that her father also endorsed a gendered stigma when it came to tattoos. Morgan stated:

My dad has like always really hated tattoos and piercings. Obviously more so on women he hates it because he's, you know, he thinks it's 1954. So, I always wanted tattoos because starting when I was in middle school I was listening to punk bands and they all had tattoos, and I really looked up to them a lot. So, you know, [my dad] would say derogatory things about people that I looked up to who had tattoos, and that made me want them even more. My mom, she wasn't so outward about her distaste for tattoos, but she would definitely judge people if they were doing something like not like having the best manners in public or something.

Later in our interview, Morgan said, "So if my dad is so anti-tattoos my mom is going to go along with a little bit." In these instances, Morgan framed her dad as the parent who actively endorsed a gendered tattoo stigma and her mom as the passive parent who was not as "outward about her distaste for tattoos." Moreover, Morgan explained that her dad harbored dated beliefs about tattoos ("he thinks it's 1954") that were reminiscent of a time when bikers, gang members, and prisoners obtained tattoos, and it was virtually unheard of for ciswomen to have tattoos

(DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). Morgan's description of her dad's attitude toward tattooed ciswomen can be understood as a gendered stigma since he hated them "more so on women." Therefore, Morgan's dad implied that gender affected the level at which he chose to stigmatize tattoos.

One participant, Olivia, who is 20-years-old and has two tattoos, noted that her father's attitude toward tattoos was the main reason she decided to hide her tattoos. Olivia explained: "I think my mom would be fine [...] My mom's philosophy on life is kind of like, 'Okay, well, it's not a choice that I would make, but you do you.' My dad is just like, [short, stern voice] 'No.' My dad has told me that if I get a tattoo, pierce my nose, or pierce the cartilage on my ears, he will not pay for college." Similar to Morgan, Olivia described her mom as more passive and her dad as the parent who enforced a gendered tattoo stigma. Olivia went on to say she had hidden her tattoos for over a year and intended to do so until she finished college. Although Olivia's father was unaware of her tattoos, he expressed a distinct dislike for them and preemptively threatened her by saying he would not pay for college if she chose to modify her body.

### *Double Standards*

When discussing their experiences with gendered tattoo stigma, many tattooed ciswomen also recalled instances where a double standard seemed to arise between the treatment they received and the treatment tattooed cismen in their families received. Gabby, 31, with ten tattoos, described a double standard in which her family received her older brother's tattoos with a warmer welcome than her own. Gabby told me, "Yeah, my brother is like covered in tattoos and he's my older brother so that's always been a funny thing for me. Watching my brother do whatever he wants and get as many tattoos as he wants and piercings and no one says anything to him! [Sarcastically] It's *really* great, it's *really* fun." Gabby noticed a clear difference in the

ways that her family treated her body modifications compared to her older brother's. From Gabby's perspective, her brother received little to no social sanctions as he could "get as many tattoos as he wants." When I probed Gabby on how exactly this double standard operated during interactions with her family members, she expanded:

Yes, for sure it's the difference in gender. I can't recall the exact wording, but I know I've pushed back [against] my mom before and been like, "He has so many tattoos, he's covered in tattoos, and you've never said anything to him! Never said anything to him and you would never dare!" She's just like, "Oh, it's different, it's just different." and I'm like, "I know what you're getting at, and I want you to say it." So I think that's for sure it [relates to gender], and I think there was always an assumed like, "Oh, this is our little girl and she's going to grow up and she's going to play dress up, wear dresses, and wear high heels. Her skin's going to be clear, no tattoos because that's purity, that's whiteness." Those are these things [my mom's generation was] taught were right and what was supposed to be for their children. And I think I totally defied a lot of that growing up, and that's why [my mom says] "it's different" and that's also why I chose to get tattoos.

When Gabby confronted her mother about this perceived double standard she was met with little explanation. Gabby's mother implied there was a fundamental difference that made it acceptable for Gabby's brother to get tattoos but not her. The surface-level explanation of "it's different" left Gabby to fill in the gaps of where this gendered tattoo stigma came from and why it persisted despite her brother being an avid tattoo collector, too. Gabby pointed to femininity norms that her mother upheld as the chief reason for the double standard. For example, Gabby used the term "little girl" and highlighted playing dress-up and having clear, white skin: characteristics that adhere to cultural beauty standards. Gabby's tattooed status did not diminish her racial privilege as a white ciswoman, but her tattoos did risk an achieved level of purity because they permanently modified her skin. However, as Gabby defied femininity norms set in place for ciswomen, her brother's tattoos did not defy normative notions of masculinity.

Much like Gabby, Laura also experienced a double standard in treatment when it came to her tattoos. However, Laura noted two buffers that helped her curb the effects of this double

standard: 1) her mother acted as her “line of defense” against family members, and 2) she justified her tattoos through symbolic meanings. Laura stated:

Once I got [my tattoos], like, [my mom] was the line of defense, of being like, “Why did Laura get that tattoo?” My mother was like, “This is why.” And [my extended family] was like, “Oh, that's nice.” Yeah, and like, whereas with my brother, it was less of like [...] because of his style of tattooing, where he's like, “I'll kind of get whatever.” I think it's less of... [trails off] It is more just like, “Oh yeah, that's him.” He's just going to get a tattoo or whatever. And like, that's just his energy.

Here, Laura explained that her extended family members did not question her brother about his tattoos because they had simply accepted that tattoos were part of his personality (“that’s him”). However, extended family members asked Laura to qualify her body project, something they did not ask her brother to do. Laura felt relieved that her mother came to her defense. Laura’s mom cited that Laura’s tattoos had a direct, symbolic meaning and that seemed to validate the tattoos to family members. Later in our interview, Laura explained that her brother typically chose tattoos that he thought were interesting and not necessarily symbolic, like Pennywise from Stephen King’s *IT*. Laura described her brother as having “full sleeves of tattoos and is like one of those menacing dudes.” Unlike her brother, Laura deliberately chose tattoos that had an underlying meaning. For instance, one of her tattoos represented her memories of camping with her family as a young child. This meaning had protective effects against the gendered double standard many tattooed ciswomen faced.

My findings regarding a gendered tattoo stigma further expand those of previous research (Thompson 2015) by analyzing father-daughter dynamics and double standards. It was clear that ciswomen experienced greater social sanctions for their tattoos from their family members than cismen did. This finding could not be expanded to those in my gender-nonconforming sample since those participants reported that their families were somewhat accepting of their tattoos, or that they had not been in close contact with their family members for some time. However, as I

discuss in the next section, a majority of ciswomen and all gender-nonconforming individuals experienced negative interactions with cisgender male tattoo artists.

## GENDERED INTERACTIONS WITH TATTOO ARTISTS: *Intimidation in the Male-*

### *Dominated Space and Seeking Comfort*

#### *Intimidation in the Male-Dominated Space*

Throughout my interviews with ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals, a clear theme arose: ciswomen and non-binary participants were more likely to report at least one negative experience with a cisgender male tattoo artist. Seven out of eight ciswomen, all three nonbinary participants, and transman, Max, described negative experiences when interacting with or being tattooed by cisgender male tattoo artists. Participants characterized these negative experiences as instances of sexual harassment, feelings of discomfort and intimidation, and perceived pressure to be an agreeable client. In contrast, no cismen reported negative experiences characterized in the same ways. It is important to note that the one ciswoman who did not report any negative experiences had two tattoos done at home by a friend rather than a professional tattoo artist. Due to the nature of her tattoos, this ciswoman did not have to enter a traditional male-dominated tattoo space and face potential discomfort, intimidation, and judgment.

As previous research has established, the U.S. tattoo culture has historically been a male-dominated practice frequented by cismen (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015). Despite the growing number of ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals who collect tattoos, it is evident they must still enter cisgender male-dominated tattoo spaces to do so. Gabby described the experience of her first tattoo by calling it “kind of messed up.” When asked why her experience was negative, Gabby explained that the cisgender male artist tattooing her sexually harassed her. In her own words, Gabby said:

G: I had a really bad experience. It was at this hyper-masculine tattoo shop in my hometown, and I just walked in and was like, “I want to get this,” and I was with my best friend at the time. They had me choose the font from a book, they made it bigger than I wanted it and it was blasted out, it wasn’t great. And also, throughout the experience as the guy was tattooing me he was super vulgar and very sexual towards me. And he was telling me all of these stories about how women who come to get tattooed often get off on the tattoo process, so he was just bragging basically. [laughs uncomfortably] So that was my first tattooing experience: getting a memorial for my dad, listening to this guy making me feel super uncomfortable in that environment.

I: And you were only 18 [years old] you said?

G: Yeah.

Gabby’s first tattoo was a walk-in, which meant she did not have a booked appointment. Instead, Gabby found the most accessible shop in her hometown and decided to give whatever artist was free to tattoo her a try. Gabby clearly described this tattoo shop as “hyper-masculine” and framed her story as one situated in a male-dominant tattoo space. Furthermore, Gabby reported that her tattoo experience was not only soured because of the poorly executed tattoo but also because of the sexual harassment she suffered. Gabby disclosed that the artist described how “women who come to get tattooed often get off on the tattoo process” and how that made her deeply uncomfortable. Unfortunately, Gabby was not the only participant to report instances of sexual harassment from male tattoo artists. Rachel explained that during the consultation process with one male artist she also dealt with sexually suggestive language and discomfort:

[The tattoo artist] was like telling me he was like, “Yeah sometimes people put like porn on their arm in this spot because not many people can see it.” And I was like, “That’s cool, for them...” [uncomfortable laugh] I just like, never said that I wanted that. I just felt like such a little girl. Yeah, I felt like such a little child in that place because it was all older people.

Just like Gabby, Rachel felt uncomfortable due to the harassment she faced. In fact, Rachel felt so uncomfortable she felt “like such a little girl.” Rachel stressed that the sexual harassment she faced made her feel self-conscious and helpless, like a “little child.” Although no cismen



reported experiences in which they were sexually harassed, one participant, Ryan, did explain that his female friend experienced sexual harassment by a male artist.

R: So, she's what would be known as an attractive female [laughs], and the tattoo artist started hitting on her and was actually like semi-harassing her. That's just a huge red flag, obviously.

I: While she was getting tattooed by him?

R: Before, she was just trying to get, thinking about getting something. She was just trying to figure something out.

Similar to Rachel, Ryan's friend was sexually harassed by a male artist during the consultation process. When I asked a follow-up question to Ryan (Has anything like that ever happened to you?), he responded by saying: "I've never had that situation, no. And I've also been tattooed by a female." In his response, Ryan underscored the salience of gender in these interactions. His female friend was sexually harassed by a male tattoo artist, but Ryan was never sexually harassed by a female artist. These vignettes of sexual harassment as told by Gabby, Rachel, and Ryan suggest that entering a male-dominated tattoo space can produce especially uncomfortable situations for individuals not afforded the privileges that coincide with being a cisgender man. Instead, these negative experiences lead ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals to feel uncomfortable and out of place.

Ciswomen and gender-nonconforming participants also discussed the need to accept designs they were not completely comfortable with. For example, Taylor recounted the experience of her first tattoo:

Well, actually my first tattoo, the text on the "eat the rich" [sign], when he showed me the drawing that he had I wasn't sure about the font. It's the font that's on me, so [...] I didn't bring it up like ever at any point. And it's hard because it's like, yeah, I don't really like that font that much, but I don't know what font I would put there in place of it. So it's like, well, there's really no point in bringing it up if I don't have any ideas to change it.

Taylor explained that even though they did not like all aspects of the tattoo design, they felt it would be pointless to bring up their concerns to the tattoo artist. Instead of asking to change the

design and have the artist help them select a new font, Taylor went on to say they “[loved] the idea of being like the cool client. Like, that's not super crazy or intense or anything.” To Taylor, being a “cool client” meant living with a design they were not completely satisfied with. Many ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals echoed Taylor’s attitude of agreeability, including Sam. Sam said:

Yeah, you know, because you come in with an idea sometimes and you say, “Can you put these components together?” and whatever they produce, you know, they spend a lot of time and effort to do that for you. You know, of course, you're paying them for it, but they're an artist, and I love to appreciate art. And so to come back and say, “I don't like your art,” especially if it's going to be permanent, it's a, it's an awkward exchange for sure.

Sam’s explanation of why they remain acquiescent during interactions with tattoo artists pointed to larger gender dynamics at play. Like Taylor who wanted to be a “cool client,” Sam felt as though they owed agreeability to their tattoo artist. No cismen shared this belief.

As highlighted by participants’ experiences with sexual harassment, entering the male-dominated tattoo space can be intimidating. However, entering the male-dominated tattoo space as someone who is not afforded cisgender male privileges can also be intimidating due to insider-outsider dynamics. In this insider-outsider dynamic, tattoo artists (insiders) have more knowledge of tattoo customs than clients (outsiders). I found that participants implicitly layered gender into this insider-outsider dynamic; no cismen felt “stupid” or like a “little child” in tattoo shops like ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals did. Furthermore, some participants sought to reconcile these feelings of intimidation by doing invisible labor or emotion management. One participant, Max (29-year-old, transman, five tattoos) tried to mitigate the feelings of intimidation by learning tattoo traditions. For example, Max explained:

Well, I didn't want like tattoo artists to think I was stupid. And so I did a lot of research [...] and I spoke with the artists and everything because I was like, “Oh, I have this idea,” and a lot of artists told me that like they would refuse to tattoo or like, it's bad practice to

get your hands or anything. Like anything that you can't cover artists, like a good artist, shouldn't tattoo that until you've got full sleeves [...] So that was like a tradition that I wanted to follow, was like not being stupid about the tattoos I got. Like asking my artist and trusting them, like, "Oh, I have this cool idea," and if they told me no, I was like, "Okay." like I never pushed any artist that I had. [...] So that, like yeah, it would be intimidating, but [also] the tattoo artists like wouldn't think that I was dumb and was getting like a stupid tattoo or something, that I was like actually there for it, I guess.

First and foremost, Max expressed that he feared tattoo artists would think he was stupid if he went to a tattoo consultation unprepared. In an effort to curb his feelings of intimidation, Max "did a lot of research" to legitimize himself as a client. As Max pointed out, many tattoo artists refuse to tattoo a person's neck, face, or hands unless they are already heavily tattooed. Max wanted to respect these tattoo traditions so that tattoo artists "wouldn't think that [he] was dumb and was getting like a stupid tattoo." Max also conveyed a sense of agreeability when talking with artists by saying, "if they told me no, I was like, 'Okay.' like I never pushed any artist that I had." Through his research, respect for tattoo traditions, and agreeability toward tattoo artists, Max attempted to mitigate the feelings of intimidation when entering the cisgender male-dominated tattoo space.

Much like Max, Chloe did not want tattoo artists to think she was "an airhead." When discussing how she reached out to tattoo artists, Chloe explained that she used emotion management to legitimize herself as a client to tattoo artists. Chloe stated:

Yeah, I do feel like I'm a people pleaser, big time. But I also don't like, you know, I don't think that anybody should have to give me six exclamation points and two smiley faces in every email. So, I try not to come off like an airhead or something like that. So, yeah, I do feel like I kind of have to stifle myself a little bit because I'm very expressive in written communication and I know that not everybody is, and that's totally okay. Um, but I don't want [tattoo artists] to be like, "Oh my God, look like I have to deal with this person who can't handle a period," or something. So, there is a little bit of that, you know? [...] But yeah, reaching out to a tattoo artist, it's a whole thing. That's why I like being tattooed by ladies and stuff, because I just think about it a little bit less because, yeah, a heavily tattooed man, I probably overthink that dynamic way too much.

As Chloe described, she felt as though she had to “stifle” herself in order to appear competent to tattoo artists. Chloe also highlighted the idea that gender plays a specific role in her emotion management when conversing with tattoo artists. Chloe explained that she “probably overthink[s] [the] dynamic” between her and a tattoo artist who is “a heavily tattooed man” more than when she is “tattooed by ladies.” Chloe, like the previously mentioned participants, was intimidated during interactions with cisgender male tattoo artists in the male-dominated tattoo space.

In sum, ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals often recalled negative experiences with male tattoo artists. Participants told stories of sexual harassment and described their attempts at being the “cool client.” Participants also expressed feelings of intimidation during the tattoo-planning process and tried to offset such feelings through emotion management and legitimizing themselves as clients. It is also important to clarify that although ciswomen and gender-nonconforming participants expressed negative experiences with male tattoo artists far more frequently than with non-male artists, male tattoo artists are not a monolith. That is to say, some participants did recall positive experiences with male artists, especially ones with whom they formed a rapport. However, my findings remain a strong indication that gender affects interactions between tattoo artists and clients.

### *Seeking Comfort*

Based on their experiences of sexual harassment, intimidation, and discomfort, it was understandable why a majority of ciswomen (63%, n=5) and gender-nonconforming participants (75%, n=3) reported seeking out non-male tattoo artists in the hopes of more positive interactions. In contrast, only one cisman, Luke, expressed a desire to get tattooed by more non-male artists. Luke said that after his first experience getting tattooed by a woman, “It was one of the best

tattoos I have. And so, I think one of my goals is to start getting tattooed by, like more women in the professional workspace.” He continued to explain that he sought out non-male artists, especially those of color, to support new perspectives in tattoo culture: “Just so I can expand the perspective and the styles of what I'm getting [...] like I have noticed that at the shop, that American traditional shop that I go to a lot, they do great work and stuff, but it's a lot of white men that work there.” Luke stressed the importance of supporting non-cisgender tattoo artists of color. Although he acknowledged the shop he frequented had plenty of white cisgender men that “do great work,” Luke expressed a desire as a client to support artists across gender and racial identities. Sam also conveyed an interest in an intersectional tattoo experience:

It sounds really bad, but I'm kind of sworn off male artists for a while. I feel like I get the most criticism and the most judgment [from male artists] for the ideas that I bring forward. With female artists, they're just so rare. You know, you walk into a shop and it's, you know, like fifteen to one female artist. I haven't come across any artists, like people of color [...] I just haven't found them, I guess [that] is something. And that's the thing that I think about, too. I think about like female shops, I think about people of color, that I want to give them a chance. And have them as a forefront for the criteria for my next [tattoos] versus like white, male, heterosexual, just guys, you know?

Unlike Luke, Sam based their desire for a non-male artist on previous negative experiences with male artists. Sam felt as though they received “the most criticism and the most judgment” from male artists as opposed to the female artists by whom they have been tattooed. Sam mentioned they had not found any tattoo artists of color local to them but hoped to find ones in the future. Moreover, Sam underlined the larger gender dynamics in tattoo shops as they highlighted that most tattoo shops were “fifteen to one” in terms of male to female artists and further characterized common tattoo artists as “white, male, [and] heterosexual.”

When I interviewed Liz, she had only been tattooed by one female artist but expressed that she “could have done better” in seeking out more non-male artists. When I asked Liz why she wanted a non-male tattoo artist, she pointed to gender as an influence in her decision: “I want

to support—again because tattoo artists and tattooing is a male-dominated industry as well and I work in a male-dominated industry—I think we've got to support people who are outside of that box so that we get more perspective, we get more representation in areas that it desperately needs it.” Liz explicitly stated that the lack of female representation in the tattoo world is what drove her to seek out more non-male artists. Liz even connected her own career in a male-dominated field (lawyer) to female tattoo artists in the tattoo industry. To Liz, supporting more female tattoo artists meant expanding perspectives beyond those of, in Sam’s words, “white, male, heterosexual” tattoo artists.

Of the ciswomen and gender-nonconforming participants who had already consulted or been tattooed by a non-male artist, they looked back fondly on these experiences and mentioned they felt comforted and respected by their tattoo artists. For instance, Taylor explained that despite her preference for one male tattoo artist’s work she still preferred to return to their previous female tattoo artist. Taylor said, “I do prefer like some of the work that he does a little bit more just because it like suits my style a little bit more. But I got to [Sarah] specifically because I'm very comfortable with her.” Instead of getting tattooed by a male artist whose designs they liked better, Taylor preferred the comfort they experienced while getting tattooed by Sarah. Taylor described her tattoo artist, Sarah, as “very sweet. I feel very comfortable around her. That's definitely something that's really important to me. Like, if I wouldn't be comfortable with her, I would not go. She's just very nice.” Gabby also experienced comfort with a female tattoo artist, as she explained:

There was another female artist I reached out to when I went to the west coast, and she unfortunately wasn't available. But our interaction was amazing! I was like, “Hey would you want to do this?” and she was like, “Hey, this is a great idea, I would absolutely love to do this!” and I was like, woah, okay this is the energy I want. Like, I want someone to be like “Great idea, yes, I want to do this for you!” So that for me was...I felt immediately at ease, immediately comfortable.

By finding a female artist that expressed excitement at the thought of tattooing her design, Gabby felt “immediately comfortable.” Gabby went on to say that with male artists she felt “there [was] something [she had] to prove,” but with the female artist, Gabby felt excited and comfortable. In the end, Gabby was unable to receive a tattoo from this female artist, but her consultation alone underscored the difference in participants’ experiences with male and female tattoo artists. Many ciswomen and gender nonconforming individuals felt the need to legitimize themselves to male artists, but with female artists, participants explained they felt more comfortable, overall. As Chloe told me, she also felt “very, very comfortable” with her female tattoo artist.

Rachel was another participant who relayed a positive experience with a female tattoo artist. Rachel said of her artist:

She's really receptive to like what you do and don't like. Like when she was sending me designs like a few days before, like some henna has kind of like droopy, things that looked almost [inaudible] to me. And I was like, “Okay, I don't really want that,” but I was like, “This part's good and this part's good.” And she did a really good job. Because at first when I saw [the design], I was like, “Oh God, like, I can't come in there tomorrow and like get this.” Parts of it were good, but this has to change. [...] But, um, she did such a good job listening, and I was so happy with what she sent me after I told her what I thought.

Unlike Rachel’s previously mentioned negative experience, where a male tattoo artist drew a fiery dragon instead of a “frilly” design she had hoped for, Rachel’s female artist did follow her wishes. Still, she was not completely satisfied with the design. However, a key difference between Rachel’s positive experience with a female artist and her negative experience with a male artist was how she felt when interacting with the artists. With the male artist, Rachel did not feel comfortable enough to ask him to change the design. Instead, Rachel booked an appointment and waited until she got home to cancel the appointment over email. However, with the female artist, Rachel felt comfortable enough to communicate her concerns about the tattoo design.

During my interviews with ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals, it was clear that gender underscored the client-tattoo artist dynamic. Ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals felt deeply uncomfortable when entering the male-dominated space as they did not have the privilege of maleness. As a result, many of these participants turned to non-male tattoo artists in search of a more comfortable experience.

#### OUTSIDE THE BINARY: *Gender Nonconformity and Consent and Ethics in Tattoo Culture*

##### *Gender Nonconformity*

Throughout my interviews with participants across the gender spectrum, I found that motivations for tattoo acquisition included commemorating life experiences, expressing oneself, memorializing past loved ones, and even just for fun. However, I found that Taylor and Charlie (both nonbinary), and Max (transman) shared the idea of embracing gender nonconformity through their tattoos. Furthermore, interviews with all gender-nonconforming individuals yielded interesting conversations about consent and ethics. In comparison, no cisgender participants raised concerns regarding these topics.

When asked how their identity as a nonbinary person related to their tattoos Taylor expressed that her tattoos helped them remember “it’s just skin.” Taylor stated:

Not like skin of somebody who has like certain parts. Like, I don't know, it just it makes me feel like, I wouldn't even say like less of a person, but like less of like somebody who's supposed to be *something* and more like a blank slate, where I can do whatever and I can say whatever and I can think whatever.

Instead of essentializing their gender to physical parts of their body, Taylor de-essentialized gender from sex and embraced nonconformity through tattoos. As Taylor explained, tattoos made them feel as though their skin was a “blank slate” upon which they were free to express themselves. Through tattoos, Taylor transgressed a socially constructed gender identity and instead accepted themselves as nonbinary. Taylor stated that one of their tattoos was also directly



inspired by their gender identity. She had a lyric from one of their favorite songs placed in the center of her chest so that it was visible. The lyric read, “Not the girl I ought to be,” and as Taylor described, “it's basically just me saying, ‘Look, I'm not a girl and I'm not like who everybody around me expects me to be.’” Through this specific tattoo, Taylor outwardly rejected the socially constructed gender category that “everyone [expected them] to be” and instead embraced their nonbinary gender identity.

On a similar note, Max, a transman, mulled over a tattoo that was also inspired by his gender identity. During his transition, Max had an American-traditional tattoo on his thigh that acted as the perfect marker for where to inject his hormones. As a result of this experience, Max asked himself, “What would I get on my other thigh to stab?” As an answer to this question, Max planned to have a lyric tattooed on him that read, “Will nature make a man of me yet?” Much like Taylor, Max’s intended tattoo highlighted his transition and also rejected the cisgender binary.

It is also important to note that qualitative narratives of gender-nonconforming individuals can further expand previous quantitative research. For instance, researchers Ragmanauskaite et al. (2020) found that transfeminine and transmasculine individuals may use tattoos to cover scars from gender-affirming surgeries. However, in talking to Max I found the opposite. Instead of covering his scars from top surgery, Max explained:

I don't want to cover my scars. I like them [...] Even if they were more visible, I wouldn't want to cover them because it's like, that's a part of my body. And it's like, I want that, because again, most of the time, the only people who are going to see that besides me is going to be like lovers. And I don't want that to be a part of my body that I hide. And I want the fact that I am trans not be like, “Oh, you're beautiful how you are” but for that to be something that they like about me. Not just like, “Oh, it's part of you,” but like, to like that about me. So, I wouldn't want to hide that.

To Max, his scars are a part of him that he did not want to feel shame over or hide. Instead, Max wanted potential partners to see his scars and like them. In this way, Max sought to normalize the scars on his body and celebrate the journey it took for him to affirm his gender identity. Max explained that he wanted to further accentuate his scars by placing tattoos under them. These tattoos would read “bless me as a Haruka” in Tibetan. As a practicing Buddhist, Max found the Buddhist concept of enlightened masculinity particularly helpful in dealing with his emotions during his transition. Therefore, Max’s narrative of embracing his gender-nonconforming body with tattoos sheds light on how motivations for tattoo acquisition differ in gender-nonconforming individuals.

Gender-nonconforming participants also described the fluidity of gender identity and explained they would be cautious of tattoos that could potentially label their identities. For example, Charlie, a nonbinary individual said:

I've known people that have gotten or talked about getting their pronouns tattooed on them, and that's something that I've thought about doing. But if I did, I don't know. I see myself very much as like on a journey that could go in any direction. Honestly, like, I don't know how I will feel and ten years, and I'm totally fine with that. I don't think I'm at a stopping point. So, I feel like getting any sort of pronoun tattoos or anything like that, I would just have to be ready to potentially just cross them out and put more, you know?

Here, Charlie highlighted the idea that gender identity is a spectrum rather than a binary. Charlie expressed that while they currently felt comfortable identifying as a nonbinary person who used they/them pronouns, the idea of getting these pronouns tattooed on them may be premature.

Taylor also discussed the fluidity of gender and the potential risk of getting an overt gender identity-inspired tattoo:

You know, it's like certain things where I've seen like a lot of people get like smaller tattoos and it's like the Venus symbol, you know, and it's like, that's something that I probably would have considered a couple of years ago, just as like something small that I could put somewhere. [...] But I definitely wouldn't get that anymore. And I probably won't get like anything else related to gender in any way, just because it's, it does

fluctuate. And I wouldn't say like I would change my mind, but like, say I ever decide that my pronouns will change and I'm not they/she, but like, they/them or something. I just, I don't want to because it fluctuates so much, I wouldn't put something permanent like on my body that shows something that might change.

As Taylor recollected, they would have previously considered getting a Venus symbol as a tattoo, an image typically used to signify cisgender females. Additionally, Taylor acknowledged that their gender is fluid, and she may go by different pronouns in the future. Therefore, getting a permanent tattoo of “something that might change” may be problematic as Taylor explores their gender. Charlie and Taylor’s thoughts illustrate the broader social construction of gender; society routinely categorizes and labels gender. As a result of this categorization, getting a tattoo that clearly states one’s gender identity or pronouns not only creates the potential to permanently label one’s identity but also neglects to view gender as fluid and open to change. Still, Charlie noted a creative way around this: “just cross them out and put more.” Nonetheless, only gender-nonconforming individuals obtained tattoos that signified their ongoing journey with gender or tattoos that allowed them to embrace their nonconformity.

#### *Consent and Ethics in Tattoo Culture*

The gender-nonconforming individuals in my study were also the only participants to initiate discussions of consent and environmental ethics with regard to tattooing. In particular, Charlie described the tattoo process as “a really intimate experience because someone is very close to you. You're being touched by a stranger.” Charlie went on to explain that the tattooing process can be especially difficult for individuals who have experienced physical abuse or sexual assault. As a result of these factors, Charlie stated: “It's really important to have that consent of who is going to be in your space. And like, at this point in my life, I know the type of people that I don't want in my space. And even if it's just for a moment to talk to me, I still don't want them

in my space or touching me.” Charlie established that consent between client and tattoo artist is important to have in order to foster a comfortable tattoo experience.

While discussing consent, Charlie said they wanted to dabble in hand-poked tattoos, a style of tattoo that requires an artist to manually deposit ink into the skin as opposed to a commonly used tattoo machine. Charlie spoke positively of the hand-poked tattoo community: “[It’s] a little bit more oddball. [...] And a lot of queer people do hand-poked tattoos, and it is, it feels like a much more...like a gentle space because there’s a lot of consent going on constantly. There is a pause between every poke, versus you just getting drawn on.” As Charlie stated, consent is vital to tattooing, especially during hand-poked tattoos. Charlie also noted that the queer hand-poked community is distinctly different from the traditionally male-dominated tattoo shops. Charlie provided an interesting glimpse into how queer communities may “queer” the tattoo process. This exploratory finding is particularly interesting and deserving of greater in-depth research.

Nonbinary participant Sam also mentioned that they are inquisitive of the tattoo process when it comes to sustainability. Sam told me:

When I was younger and getting tattoos, it was, “What color ink are you doing?” And now I’m asking them, “Is this non-cruelty? Is this organic ink? Is this sustainably sourced color pigment?” It’s stuff like that that I never thought I’d find myself having a conversation with a tattoo artist about. You know, even a little plastic cup that they use, I’m like, “Oh, is that cornstarch-based or is that plastic-based?” And they just look at me like I have three heads. Like, we didn’t think people would ask this that question at all. So, it’s because I’m big on sustainability, too. [...] So I have been looking more for eco-conscious tattoo artists as well moving forward.

In addition to seeking out non-male artists, Sam also looked for tattoo artists that use organic, sustainable products. Although Sam was the only participant who reported asking their tattoo artists such questions, they illuminate an interesting topic for further study. Like hand-poked communities that foster a culture of consent, how might gender-nonconforming individuals also

foster a culture of sustainability in tattooing? Although I was unable to answer these questions in the current study, my initial findings provide a basis for future empirical investigation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout my 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty participants across the gender spectrum, I found that participants constructed unified notions of masculinity and femininity through tattoos. Study participants of various gender identities agreed that masculine tattoos contained bold, thick lines and motifs of aggressive animals while feminine tattoos had finer, delicate lines and contained floral imagery. Additionally, when discussing masculine and feminine tattoos, participants constructed masculine and feminine tattoos in opposition to one another. Participants formed dichotomized categories in which masculine tattoos were bold and animalistic and feminine tattoos were delicate and flowery. Such findings are consistent with previous work that demonstrated the categorizing of masculine and feminine tattoos (Atkinson 2002; Burgess and Clark 2010), however, I expand the construction of masculine and feminine tattoos to include gender-nonconforming individuals.

West and Zimmerman (1987) theorize that gender is an “achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means.” In terms of doing gender, my findings indicate that participants socially constructed broad archetypes of masculine and feminine tattoos. My findings also demonstrate that tattoo motifs and placements are key factors that help participants *do* gender; cisgender participants used tattoos to perform the gender associated with their sex consequently reproducing a larger cisgender binary. In comparison, gender-nonconforming participants used tattoos to acknowledge gender as a fluid journey and simultaneously deconstruct rigid binaries.

In analyzing participants' performance of gender through tattoos I found that cisgender individuals performed and reproduced hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) theorize that society regards hegemonic masculinity as superior to emphasized femininity. Individuals strive to achieve hegemonic masculinity by asserting their heterosexuality, dominance, and aggression (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Through my use of these two theoretical frameworks, I found that cismen performed hegemonic masculinity when discussing their tattoos and the motivations behind getting them. In particular, cismen used tattoos to reaffirm their heterosexuality, display their aggressive ideals, and establish and maintain their toughness. Cismen experienced a greater privilege than ciswomen since they did not have to make conscious efforts to hide their tattoos: visible tattoos did not pose a threat to their masculinity.

In comparison, ciswomen performed emphasized femininity. Emphasized femininity complies with and accommodates the asymmetrical relationship between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2019). Unlike cismen, ciswomen made conscious efforts to place their tattoos on parts of their bodies they could easily conceal with long hair or clothing. Thus, ciswomen complied with the idea that large tattoos in visible areas of the female body threaten the performance of femininity (Atkinson 2002; Thompson 2015). When not concealing their tattoos, ciswomen still performed emphasized femininity and essentialized gender to sex through tattoos that framed parts of the biologically female body. In other words, ciswomen constructed tattoos as distinctly feminine if they framed or emphasized areas like the breasts, narrow waists, or "shapely" legs. Ciswomen conformed to the patriarchal standard that these parts of the body are inherently feminine. No cismen in the study essentialized their masculinity through tattoos on specific parts of the male

body. Therefore, cisgender participants in my study reproduced the subordinated gender dynamic between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity; ciswomen had to carefully place their tattoos on discreet areas of their bodies or frame biologically female parts of the body to accommodate an existing cultural standard of femininity, yet cismen did not have to consider gendered consequences of their tattoo placement.

Tattooed ciswomen in my study also expressed unique experiences with gendered stigma. In asking the research question “How does gender shape the lives and experiences of tattooed people?” I found further evidence of a gendered tattooed stigma that functioned through father-daughter dynamics and double standards. Thompson (2015) chronicled a gendered tattoo stigma but looked particularly at how maternal figures stigmatized tattooed daughters. I extend Thompson’s (2015) findings to show that ciswomen experienced a gendered tattoo stigma in which their fathers actively upheld dominant femininity norms upon them. In my study, ciswomen explained their fathers believed tattoos would negatively affect their worth and beauty as they moved through life. Furthermore, many ciswomen recounted stories where tattooed cismen in their lives suffered little, if any, sanctions for their modified bodies, but their tattooed bodies garnered inquiry and negative comments.

The narratives told by tattooed ciswomen about their experiences with gendered stigma show that, despite an ongoing tattoo renaissance, tattooed ciswomen still receive social sanctions for choosing to live in a modified body. Additionally, my findings show that social sanctions from family members work to reaffirm the boundaries of what is acceptable for ciswomen’s bodily appearance. The fathers and family members that stigmatized ciswomen’s tattooed bodies upheld the belief that tattoos lessen ciswomen’s beauty and worth. Therefore, my findings on gendered stigma further illuminate a subordinated gender dynamic wherein fathers and family

members policed ciswomen's bodies, but tattooed cismen did not experience social sanctions for their body modifications.

Gender was also relevant to client-tattoo artist interactions. Tattooing is a male-dominated industry (DeMello 2000; Thompson 2015), and as a result, many participants consulted with and received tattoos from cisgender male tattoo artists. All ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals who were professionally tattooed by a cisman at one point or another in their tattoo journeys reported negative experiences with male tattoo artists. Participants described feeling intimidated, judged, and uncomfortable when consulting with and getting tattooed by male artists, and in more extreme cases, participants disclosed instances of sexual harassment from male artists. No cismen reported negative interactions with male tattoo artists like those disclosed by ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals. My findings demonstrate that cismen enter male-dominated tattoo spaces with an in-group privilege, however, ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals must do added work to mitigate feelings of intimidation and legitimize themselves as clients. For instance, ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals in my study legitimized themselves through agreeability, embodying the "cool client," doing extensive research into tattoo traditions, and managing their emotions when consulting with tattoo artists. In essence, tattooed cisgender men benefited from gender dynamics that subordinate tattooed ciswomen and gender non-conforming individuals.

Similar to ciswomen who enter male-dominated professions, I found that being a non-cisman client can *other* ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals participating in tattoo culture. As a result of feeling uncomfortable, intimated, and othered, ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals reported seeking non-cisgender male tattoo artists. Ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals described greater comfort and communication with non-



cisgender male tattoo artists. By finding an artist that was not a cisgender male, ciswomen and gender-nonconforming participants did not have to accommodate or comply with a traditionally male-dominated tattoo culture that subordinated them.

I also discovered that gender-nonconforming individuals in my study used tattoos to embrace their gender identities. First, gender-nonconforming participants got tattoos directly motivated by their identities (like song lyrics), and second, gender-nonconforming participants used tattoos to embrace their nonconformity by putting them in visible places. At large, these participants performed gender through tattoos that acknowledged their personal gender journeys and the overall fluidity of gender. In contrast to cisgender participants who reproduced a cisgender binary, gender-nonconforming individuals used tattoos to deconstruct gender binaries. I also found that one transgender participant, Max, wanted to accentuate his scars from top surgery with tattoos instead of hiding them. Max's narrative of scar emphasis rather than scar coverage offers an opposing narrative to those found in a previous quantitative study by Ragmanauskaite et al. (2020). Furthermore, I found that gender-nonconforming participants were the only group of participants to raise concerns about consent and sustainability with regard to the tattooing process. These exploratory findings suggest that the motivations and experiences of tattooed transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals differ distinctly from those of cisgender individuals.

There are important limitations to consider in this study. The sample contained a limited number of cisgender, gender-nonconforming, and transgender individuals; I interviewed eight cismen, eight ciswomen, and four gender-nonconforming participants (three nonbinary individuals and one transman). Due to this limited sample size, I am unable to generalize my findings to all cisgender and gender non-conforming individuals. Studies seeking to expand my

findings would benefit from larger sample sizes to uncover how individuals may perform nonhegemonic masculinities, such as complicit, subordinated, or marginalized masculinities. Additionally, researchers should draw specifically from gender-nonconforming populations to understand the nuanced performances and experiences with gender as a tattooed individual who identifies outside of the cisgender binary.

Participants in the study also demonstrated both an awareness and knowledge of gender identities and dynamics. Cismen, such as John and Rick, mentioned they knew ciswomen who felt pressured to cover their tattoos. Similarly, Luke, a cisman, reported on his desire to seek out non-cisgender male tattoo artists. Ciswomen and gender-nonconforming individuals discussed nonbinary, femme, and queer tattoo artists or tattooed individuals they knew personally.

Participants across the gender spectrum often mentioned masculinity and femininity and spoke about their gender in an articulate manner. This awareness and knowledge of gender may be due to various factors: younger adults may be more culturally informed of gender identities, and gender-nonconforming individuals may have a heightened awareness of their gender identities as they live in a largely cisgender world. I recognize my participants have a greater knowledge of gender than cisgender and gender-nonconforming individuals at large, and subsequently, my findings are not generalizable to all cisgender and gender-nonconforming people. Also, I must acknowledge my own bias as a researcher; I am a tattooed white, ciswoman who regularly discusses, reads, and studies gender. Although I took measures to remain objective, such as limiting discussions of my own tattoo experiences with participants, keeping neutral facial expressions, and responding in a neutral tone to participants' answers, my results are not void of bias.

Further, my sample was predominantly white (90%), and consequently, participants had greater privilege in gender performance and navigating client-tattoo artist relationships. Although some participants, like Luke, Sam, and Gabby, discussed their white privilege, a majority of white participants did not discuss their inherent privilege as a white, tattooed person. People of color experience greater difficulty finding a tattoo artist willing and capable of tattooing them (Shah 2016; Yzola 2019). Moreover, women of color experience both a racialized and gendered tattoo stigma in which society views them as deviant and foreign (Thompson 2015). No participants in my study reported negative experiences with tattoo artists based on their race. While white ciswomen in my study experienced a gendered tattoo stigma, they did not experience a racialized and gendered tattoo stigma given their white privilege.

Future research should investigate the ways people of color experience tattoo stigmatization, client-tattoo artist relationships, and how these experiences may differ across the gender spectrum. Likewise, future research utilizing an intersectional lens and a larger, more diverse sample of racial, ethnic, and gender identities may provide greater insights into how gender construction and performance through tattoos may vary in racially marginalized groups. Taken together, the findings from this qualitative study further illuminate the salience of gender in the lives of individuals. Still, scholarly work on gender and tattoos remains understudied. As tattoos grow in popularity and cultural relevancy it is imperative that social scientists continue to illuminate the ways that modifying one's body enables gender performance.

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## APPENDIX

## Interview Guide

**Participant basics-** *“I’m going to start by asking you some basic questions...”*

1. What are your pronouns?
2. Would you mind sharing your gender identity with me?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your current job?
5. Would you mind sharing your highest level of education with me?

**Tattoo general-** *“I’d like to talk a bit now about your tattoos...”*

1. How many tattoos do you have in total?
2. Where are your various tattoos located?
  - a. How did you choose the placement for your tattoo?
3. How old were you when you got your first tattoo?
4. What was the specific motivation behind your first tattoo?
5. Are there any stories or meanings behind your tattoos?
  - a. Would you mind elaborating on some of these stories?
6. What was your reason, in general, for getting tattoos?

**Gender expression with tattoos-** *“I would like to talk now about your experiences with your tattoos...”*

1. What was your experience like getting tattooed?
2. Do you think your tattoos have changed the way you look?
3. Do you feel as though your gender relates to your tattoos?
  - a. In what ways do you feel your tattoos align with your gender identity?
4. Is there a certain aesthetic you aim to achieve with your tattoos?
5. Do you think your tattoos have changed the way others look at you?
6. Have your tattoos ever been the topic of discussion for others?
  - a. If so, what have those conversations been like?
7. Do you see similar trends in tattoos?
  - a. If so, what type of trends?
  - b. Who tends to ascribe to these trends in tattooing?
8. What do tattoos mean to you?