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NEGOTIATION AND RESISTANCE:  
THE FEMALE TATTOOED BODY

**NEGOTIATION AND RESISTANCE**  
**THE FEMALE TATTOOED BODY**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

### **Negotiation and Resistance The Female Tattooed Body**

This study examines the ways in which the female tattooed body is interpreted by others, and to what degree these perceptions impact the tattooing practices, the behaviour, and ultimately the social status of tattooed women. Broadly speaking, the study focuses on the process of ‘meaning making’ in relation to female tattoos, and how the various meanings that are ascribed to tattoos and those who bear them are constantly shifting across bodies and time in a manner that renders bodies as either *negotiated* or *resistant*.

In examining interpretations of female tattoos, I take a detailed look at how female tattooing comes to be interpreted within the context of sexuality. Discussion on this topic focuses in part on the recent development of the label *tramp stamp* for women’s lower back tattoos. The implications of these various tattoo interpretations are considered and discussed in relation to the symbolic expression of power that is associated with many female tattoo projects.

The thesis contributes to the literature on tattooing, body modifications, femininity, gender resistance, promiscuity, symbolic meaning, and labeling.



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## Introduction

The intent of this study is to examine how the female tattooed body is interpreted by others, and to what degree these perceptions impact the tattooing practices, behaviour, and ultimately the social status of tattooed women. The study focuses on the process of ‘meaning making’ in relation to female tattoos, and how the various meanings that are ascribed to tattoos and those who bear them are constantly shifting across bodies and time in a manner that renders bodies as either *negotiated* or *resistant*. In this context, negotiation is understood as soliciting a measure of social approval for one’s tattoos, wherein the young female tattooees are viewed as attempting to work within the bounds of what is socially appropriate, and what is perceived to cause the least potential risk to their social status in the acquisition of their tattoo(s). Alternatively, resistance is understood as that which challenges the traditional view of appropriate femininity and ‘feminine’ tattooing, and thus engages in the selection of tattoos that will be interpreted as a challenge to dominant gender roles. The extent to which this meaning making has an impact on the performance of gender through tattooing, and in particular the performance of femininity, is also discussed throughout the course of the analysis. I will be looking at various female tattoo projects, including tattoos that are inscribed with meaning in relation to sexuality as well as providing an in depth discussion of the *tramp stamp* – a popular culture label that is currently in use to describe the very popular lower back tattoo on women.

Based on my results I argue that the ways in which female tattooed bodies become labeled in relation to their perceived negotiation and resistance reflects the informal social control of the female body, as it relates to gender politics in a larger social context. While this study focuses on the perceptions of tattooing and tattooed women per se, I would suggest that the implications of this study go

beyond body modification practices. Rather the research speaks to the ways in which womanhood is portrayed, reaffirmed and recreated in a corporeal sense, and why such affirmations play a critical role in relation to gender inequality.

In this introduction I provide context and background for this study on the female tattooed body. I begin by detailing my theoretical approach, which brings the concerns of symbolic interactionism, particularly in relation to meaning, together with the concerns of labeling theory and critical feminist theory. This is followed by a discussion of the two main bodies of conceptual literature that are most central to my questions about tattooing. The first of these areas is the literature that focuses on tattooing itself in the context of North American practices and perspectives over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second body of knowledge which has informed this study deals with the construction and control of the female body and female sexuality. In discussing each of these bodies of literature I summarize some of the predominant themes as well as identify the gaps that my thesis makes a contribution towards filling. Finally, having clarified my questions and contextualizing them within the relevant conceptual literature, I provide details about how this study was conducted. The introduction ends with an overview of the remaining chapters of this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The following study draws upon various aspects of symbolic interactionism, labeling theory, and critical feminist theory. First, and primarily, this study is premised in the idea that bodily representation serves as a symbolic means of communication, and that ‘meaning making’ plays a key role in corporeal representation of self, and can also potentially play a key role in the informal social control of the body. The emphasis on meaning making and its links to labeling and social control situates the study within a symbolic interactionist paradigm.

For symbolic interactionists, the structure of society is “created and maintained by the actions and interactions of individuals” (Turner 2003:343). The term *symbolic interactionism* was initially coined by Herbert Blumer (1969), but the development of this school of thought goes back to the work of George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead argues that the individual is a product of society; self is developed from the process of interaction wherein symbols serve as a means of communication between individuals. Thus Mead “viewed society as a *constructed* phenomenon that arises from the adjustive interactions among individuals” (Turner 2003:349). The symbolic interactionist perspective has developed from these initial insights, and emphasizes the ability of social actors to create and use symbols as a part of a collective experience. This incorporates not only verbal communication, but also “facial gestures, voice tones, body countenance, and other symbolic gestures that have a common meaning and

understanding” (Turner 2003:353). Such methods of symbolic communication are argued to contribute to a collective process of meaning making, whereby overarching social structures are created, maintained, and changed.

Mead discussed a process whereby an individual will consciously ‘take the role of the other’ as a means of determining potential societal reactions to one’s representation of self (Mead 1934). Charles Horton Cooley’s further developed the concept of *the looking glass self*, where the behaviours and responses of ‘others’ during interaction serve as a metaphorical mirror within which an individual comes to develop and evaluate his/her sense of self (Cooley 1998). The response of others becomes the means whereby individuals monitor their own behaviors, and enter into a process of ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1959). Actors use a variety of methods to create a particular impression in interaction, including but not limited to the use of appearance, to reflect social position, social status, etc. Goffman’s discussion of self-monitoring “introduces considerations of manipulation and power to symbolic interactionism” through the recognition that the social actor fashions him/herself in a variety of different roles, depending upon context, and directly relating to perceived social rewards (Farganis 2004:351). This *front stage self* is not only constructed and adapted through interaction, but can also be related to moral regulation – and thus informal social control - in that “individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged” (Goffman 1959:366). Thus Goffman argues that “As performers we are merchants of morality” (1959:366).

The insights of symbolic interactionism have been incorporated into the sociological study of deviance and social control in the form of labeling theory (Becker 1963). As one of the first formulators of labeling theory, Becker argued that deviance is not merely an inherent state of being/action, but is rather a process wherein a label is applied to people through interaction, having considerable consequences for the person so labeled. He also introduced the concept of *master status* to the study of deviance, a term that was initially coined by Everett Hughes (1945). *Master status* refers to an overriding characteristic by which others come to identify an individual, and which can have serious implications for the individual in terms of his/her social identity and life chances (Becker 1963). Simply put, Becker and other labeling theorists argue that the labeling process can serve as a means of informal social control. The labeling of the ‘deviant’ can serve as a precautionary mechanism to encourage individuals to continually monitor their *impression management* or *front stage self* for communicative symbolism that indicates conformity with mainstream ideals.

While labeling theory has proven to be extremely valuable in understanding the processes by which individuals are labeled and socially controlled, the theory has been criticized for not taking social structure into account, and for not considering that the power to label is differentially distributed in society across race, class and gender lines. Those specifically interested in gender, for example, have argued that in a patriarchal society, deviant labels

become a mechanism used to control and oppress women. The premise of critical feminist theory is that gender inequality is reproduced and maintained through both the coercive and voluntaristic acts of individuals during micro-level interaction (Chafetz 1990). Deviant labels, within this paradigm, can be understood as a means of maintaining gender relations. The use of deviant labels against women contributes to an understanding of “how sex roles and [the] expectations of men and women are transmitted and internalized” (Farganis 2004:369). In this sense feminist theory brings a critical edge to labeling theory and allows me in this thesis to go beyond looking at the meanings of female tattoos for social actors to a larger argument about gender relations and gender politics in our society.

### **The Literature on Tattooing**

Reflecting the rising popularity of the practice, tattooing has recently received increased attention in the academic literature along with an analysis of many other ‘spectacular’ body modification practices. The research in the area is still limited, however, and detailed academic research involving the interplay between gender politics and tattooing is relatively rare. The focus of much of the research on North American tattooing to date has thus been on the historical development of tattooing (Caplan 2000), and how tattooing has recently become appropriated as a means of bodily communication for middle class consumption (Fleming 2000, Govenar 2000, Irwin 2003).

Tattooing has been discussed in terms of its communicative function, as a socioeconomic signifier, as a means of representing one’s personal identity through symbolic communication (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Irwin 2008; Sanders 1989), and as political resistance through the display of spectacular bodies (Pitts 2003). Studies about the tattooing subculture and the lives of tattoo artists themselves have also been relatively more common (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Steward 1990), as have studies that consider media portrayals or social perspectives of the tattooed body as ‘other’ (Beeler 2005, Benson 2000, DeMello 1995).

In setting the stage for my study of female tattooing there are several areas of interest within the broader academic literature on tattooing that will be discussed in the following section. This includes an overview of literature that i) focuses on tattooing as a practice that has traditionally been *socially devalued* (in relation to the historical performance of a ‘lower class’ aesthetic) and the extent to which this association may or may not have changed; ii) emphasizes tattooing as a traditionally masculine practice, and as a mechanism in the performance of masculinity; iii) draws a correlation between the historical development of female tattooing and the sexualization of the practice; iv) considers tattooing in relation to the concept of power, and the control of regulated bodies; and v) looks at

*current renditions of female tattooing specifically* in relation to both gender resistance and gender negotiation. In understanding how tattooing comes to be ‘read’ on female bodies specifically in the following study, we must first understand the broader historical background against which the current assumptions about tattooed bodies are made. Each of these areas in the literature will provide a background on tattooing against which my data on the female tattooed body can be analyzed.

*i) Tattooing and Social ‘Class’: The Devalued Body?*

Various academics have detailed the use of tattooing within North American deviant subcultures, and the accompanying historical association of tattooing with lower socio-economic status and ‘fringe’ members of society (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 1995, Sanders 1989, Steward 1990). The historical perspective of the tattooed body as a socially devalued body can be linked to assumptions regarding the performance of socio-economic location and group membership – specifically lower socio-economic status and ‘fringe’ group membership such as that which is more commonly associated with bikers, sailors, gangs, criminals, etc. (DeMello 1995, Govenar 2000). Atkinson argues that:

A cultural stereotype has long held that tattoos are marks of shame worn only by outlaws, misfits, or those fallen from social grace. According to historically dominant perceptions of the practice, willfully marking the body with tattoos is the embodiment of a person’s *inability* to conform with existing social norms, values, and beliefs. (my emphasis, Atkinson 2003:23).

Current attitudes towards tattooing have been heavily influenced by these historical perspectives (Atkinson 2003).

Academic research has also been influenced by these stereotypes and by assumptions that the tattooed body carries overt messages that serve to reveal the discredited ‘truth’ about the social actor beneath. This is clearly evident in older scholarly research on the topic, such as Lombroso’s (1860) research on tattooing in the context of criminality and prostitution (Caplan 2000), and also in more recent research. Sanders argued that previous to the 1980s, psychological analyses of tattooing consistently tended towards medicalizing and pathologizing the ‘deviant’ practice of tattooing: “The decision to be tattooed is rarely presented as having essentially ‘healthy’, pro-social, self-affirming roots; most studies are premised on an assumption of pathology” (Sanders 1989:37). Thus it is suggested that the links that have been drawn between tattooing and pathology have both developed within and have helped to maintain a more conservative mainstream understanding of the practice. Researchers argue that medicalization and pathologization can thus serve as a means of controlling bodies, and that the process of medicalizing resistant bodies is overlain with political motivations



linked to relations between the powerful and the powerless (Bereska 2008, Pitts 2003). Tattooing has historically been subject to social sanction through the use of academic pathologization (Caplan 2000, Pitts 2003, Sanders 1989), as well as in terms of the more broadly used social sanctions in mainstream society that tended towards criminalizing the tattooed body (Atkinson 2003, Caplan 2000, DeMello 1995, Sanders 1989).

While North American tattooing has traditionally been associated with fringe membership and lower-class representations of self, academics argue that the practice has been recently culturally reappropriated for the purpose of representing a middle class aesthetic (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000, Fleming 2000, Govenar 2000, Halnon 2006). Depending on the body on which tattoos are inscribed, some scholars have suggested that current mainstream tattooing is often an affirmation of middle class values rather than a disassociation from those values through the use of a 'deviant' presentation of self (Halnon 2006, Irwin 2008). In analyzing the process by which tattoos "have been transformed from lower- to middle-class distinction", Halnon argues that we can draw upon the spatial concept of gentrification, suggesting that "gentrification processes are applicable to 'symbolic neighborhoods' in popular culture", which invariably includes the symbolic communication that occurs through the display and 'reading' of one's body modification choices (Halnon 2006:33). Scholars argue that many tattooees gentrify their tattoo art in ways that make it appear more synonymous with a middle class aesthetic. The processes by which they do this includes an increased association of tattooing with the concept of artwork (Halnon 2006) and various other "legitimation" practices wherein the tattooee shares a story behind the tattoo as a means of justifying the acquisition of the tattoo (Irwin 2008).

The historical association of tattooing with deviant subcultures and the current middle class appropriation of tattooing have been synthesized in the literature in terms of the symbolic communication of tattoos: while tattooing still has a semblance of rebellion and the fringe membership that has traditionally been associated with the practice, on a body perceived to be of middle class origin, with tattoos that are representative of a middle class aesthetic, tattooing becomes reinterpreted as an 'edgier' version of middle class values. Tattoos have thus recently soared in popularity among the middle class (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000, Halnon 2006, Irwin 2008), creating a rise in tattooing more broadly speaking that has contributed to the accompanying rise in tattooing among women specifically (Atkinson 2002). Far from being fully normalized, however, MacCormack argues, "Tattoos can be called fashion or consumptive products, but on a practical level it would be naïve to claim that they are yet socially acceptable. Tattooed persons are still defined as tattooed persons, we are still compelled to 'cover up', to 'answer to'." (MacCormack 2006:79). Despite the 'gentrification' that has led to the rise in popularity in tattooing, tattooing still maintains a semblance of 'other', and of its historic devalued status.

*ii) Tattooing and Masculinity: The Default Status of the Tattooed Body*

Another underlying theme in the tattooing literature is the association between tattooing and the display of hyper-masculinity. To the same extent that tattooing has been historically linked with the lower class throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Atkinson 2003, Caplan 2000, DeMello 1995), tattoos have historically been associated with the concept of masculinity and displays of masculinized ideals regarding physicality and behaviour (Atkinson 2003, Guest 2000, Halnon 2006). This association can likely be traced back to the initial introduction of tattooing in North America primarily upon the bodies of male sailors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Atkinson 2003, Caplan 2000, DeMello 2000). The adoption of military and navy imagery in turn facilitated the promotion of a militarized ‘tough’ version of masculinity through the display of one’s tattoos (Atkinson 2003). Through the popularity of such imagery during the 1920s to 1950s tattooing became increasingly associated with various militarized ideals regarding honor, patriotism and strength. During this time tattoo parlors became “ports of call for servicemen, settings to prove one’s masculinity to others” (Atkinson 2003:36).

More recently, academics suggest that tattooing is still often displayed in various media representations along with the muscular bodies and aggressive mannerisms associated with the display of hyper-masculinity (Beeler 2005, DeMello 2000). Thus while the literature clarifies that the default status of the traditionally tattooed body is a *male* body, this association is not just a historical one, but rather has carried over into current representations of tattooing. This has specific implications in relation to female tattooing, implications that will be discussed more fully later.

*iii) Female Tattooing and Sexuality*

If tattoos on male bodies have traditionally been associated with the display of social locale and masculinity, tattoos on female bodies have often been historically associated with sexuality. In North American culture this association has its earliest roots in the *circus era* of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Govenar 2000, Mifflin 1997, Oettermann 2000). The traveling circuses of this period placed a strong emphasis on performance and spectacle - a spectacle that served to feed the curiosity of the public through the display of unusual talents and abilities or unusual physical characteristics such as physical deformities and tattooing (Mifflin 1997). During this period heavily tattooed bodies were an uncommon sight in day-to-day life, and as such the heavily tattooed body was treated as a public spectacle commonly associated with primitive, heathen, and uncivilized cultures (Atkinson 2003). Tattooed men and women found themselves able to make a living by displaying their bodies for an eager crowd as

a part of this traveling circus ‘freak show’, which was accessible to the public for a price (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000, Fisher 2002, Mifflin 1997).

The tattooed performers who displayed their bodies in circus shows during this time included heavily tattooed women, and it is specifically the development of these women as sexualized fetishes (Mifflin 1997, Oettermann 2000) - on display for a consuming public - that likely serves as a historical precedent in North America for the sexualization of the female tattooed body today. Fisher (2002:96) has suggested that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “tattooed women in the circus found themselves wearing more revealing costumes in order to show how much of their bodies were actually tattooed.”. The occupational requirement for women to remove items of clothing as a means of showing their tattoo work is likely a key factor in the association between female tattooing and sexuality, for the display of the tattooed circus lady would not be possible if she remained fully clothed (Atkinson 2003, Fisher 2002, Mifflin 1997, Oettermann 2000).

Academics argue that the circus display of the tattooed woman developed into “a form of soft pornography in which women would strip before the crowd, adding a libidinal element to the veritable peep show” (Atkinson 2003:35). As “the tattooed lady became the pinnacle of tattoo attractions” (Atkinson 2003:35), this exposure of the body led to the increased linking of tattoos on women to sex. Further, these residual notions regarding tattooing and sexuality have remained throughout the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century – as evident in the early 1950s when Samuel Steward, an academic turned tattooist, conducted research along with the Kinsey Institute into the sexual motivations of tattooing in relation to pain and sadomasochism (Steward 1990). Steward also discussed fetish tattooing within this context, suggesting that women’s tattoos in the early 1950s often indicated sexual possession of the woman by a male lover (Steward 1990).

More recent academics have linked female tattooing with sexual intimacy in heterosexual relationships, suggesting:

The bikini-line, upper thigh or breast tattoo sometimes represents a secret gift for a lover; it is revealed when clothing is removed. Within phallogentric culture the revelation of a tattoo in these places, near the site of castration, could present as fetishes. (MacCormack 2006:70).

The concept of the tattoo as an intimate sexual gift has also been discussed by Sanders, who argues that women often wish to beautify their bodies through tattooing as a way of presenting themselves as sexually attractive to their partner (Sanders 1989). More recently still, DeMello has suggested that female tattooed bodies are interpreted within the context of sexuality, especially in media venues. In her research on the magazines in which tattoo artists commonly display their work, DeMello found that there was a very clear disparity in terms of the photographic display of male and female tattooed bodies:

[T]he men who are chosen tend to have a large part of their body covered with tattoos; generally a full back piece, both sleeves (arms), and perhaps some leg work or other body work.

Women featured in the magazine, on the other hand, often have as few as two or three small-to-medium sized tattoos, and are very often shown nude, or at least topless (even when the tattoos are easily visible while clothed). (DeMello 1995:46).

DeMello goes on to argue that for this reason “Some tattoo magazines can only be purchased by adults due to female nudity” (DeMello 1995:45). In this sense the image of women and tattoos that started with the circus era tattoo show – as a sexualized peep show – continues. The removal of women’s clothing in tattoo magazines becomes less about the display of the art work itself, and more distinctly related to a consumer sexualization of the female tattooed body (DeMello 1995). This explains Turner’s observation that “discrete and aesthetic butterflies and flowers on the shoulders and backs of fashion models and middle-class professional women are sexual consumer images” (Turner 1999:47).

To summarize, an overview of the literature on female tattooing and sexuality suggests that the tattooed female body is both interpreted and performed in the context of a highly sexualized media and advertisement-saturated society, “a culture of unrelenting objectification where women’s bodies are used to sell everything” (Brumberg 1997:196) - even children’s toys such as the tattooed Barbie doll (Beeler 2005, Irwin 2003, Mifflin 1997). This reflects the extent to which the *sexualized* female tattoo has become an almost normalized consumer image within mainstream society. The concept of sexuality in relation to female tattooing is an important one, and will figure prominently in my analysis.

#### *iv) Tattooing as a Claim to Power*

The relationship between tattooed bodies and vested interests of power and control dates back to many of the earliest practices of tattooing. One of many social discourses that serves to denigrate and delegitimize the practice of tattooing harkens back to the “branding” of animals as a sign of ownership, and thus draws connections to the powerlessness and physical domination of domestic farm animals, and the *social devaluing* of human tattooed bodies (Caplan 2000, Jones 2000, Schrader 2000). The association between tattooing and physically/socially dominated or otherwise powerless human bodies can be traced back as well to the practice of tattooing slaves and criminals throughout various cultures and across time (Fisher 2002, Jones 2000, Schrader 2000). Some of the earliest uses of tattooing upon the human body thus involved notions of the ownership of one human body by another, and the relative powerlessness of the tattooed body was reflected in the experience of having been tattooed against one’s will.

Interestingly, recent research regarding tattooing suggests that this association between tattooing and power has in effect been reversed and turned on its head. Instead of being forcibly tattooed against one’s will as a means of asserting control over an individual, individuals now commonly tattoo *themselves* as a means of asserting control over *their own* bodies. This is evident through a

comparison of historical versions of criminal, prisoner, and slave tattooing (Fisher 2002, Jones 2000, Schrader 2000) with current manifestations of convict tattooing in North American prisons (DeMello 1993). Fisher suggests that “*historically, groups whose bodies are regulated by the nation-state have been the most likely to have tattoos*”, and yet it is evident that the means by which these state-regulated bodies are becoming tattooed bodies has changed dramatically over the course of time (my emphasis, Fisher 2002:103). He continues:

If *involuntary* tattoos were a form of control over the body by the state from ancient Greece to Nazi Germany, *voluntary* tattoos may be viewed as a cultural appropriation and reinterpretation of a historically regulating technology in order for the individual to re-establish control over their body. (my emphasis, Fisher 2002:104).

This claim is consistent with recent research that has been done on convict body modification in North American prisons. DeMello discusses the power struggles and personal motivations that underpin the prevalence of ‘jail house tattoos’ within the prison system:

[W]here the prisoner experiences his identity being stripped from him, becoming tattooed is crucial in order for a convict to establish an identity vis a vis the prison establishment. The prison tattoo is a “subversive bodily act” that re-establishes the convict’s authority over his own body and challenges the system which attempts to control him. (DeMello, 1993:13).

The historical precedence of establishing power over the body (Fisher 2002) is still a motivating factor for tattooing among state-regulated bodies in our current society. While the means may have changed from forcible tattooing against one’s will to willfully tattooing one’s own body, the association between tattooing and the display of *power* and *control over the body* is still a valid one (Fisher 2002).

This overview of the literature on tattooing as a statement of power and control over the body, especially in relation to heavily regulated bodies, relates directly to the argument that I will be developing about female tattooing in relation to resistance and control. The association between current renditions of tattooing and a presumed *claim to power* has an impact on the ways in which tattooed bodies are currently read and understood, to the extent that the acquisition of tattooing is often understood as expressing a claim to power over one’s own body that is synonymous with the resistance of regulation (Fisher 2002, Halnon 2006).

#### v) *Current Tattooing and Women: Resistance and Negotiation*

It is clear that much of the research on North American tattooing has considered the historical development of tattooing as well as the recent upsurge in the popularity of tattoos among the middle class. The majority of these studies,

however, have focused primarily on male tattooing, or on tattooing more broadly discussed within a genderless context. To date, only a few scholars have touched on the gender politics that play themselves out in current tattooing practices. Atkinson argues that despite the increasing middle class consumption of body modification practices, women's bodies still serve as contested sites for gender representation in relation to their tattoo selections (Atkinson 2003). He further argues that female tattooees often use a process of negotiation when choosing how to symbolically represent themselves through their tattoo projects, in order to mitigate this potential disapproval (Atkinson 2002). These negotiations include a variety of measures wherein the tattoo is made to appear more feminine, and is thus considered to be more socially appropriate for the female body. Further, such negotiations relating to one's tattoo selections are said to be associated with broader gender politics wherein social disapproval serves as a means of maintaining the display of femininity:

The established patriarchal order in a figuration creates a standard for body-modification practices that supports existing social relationships of power between men and women. Over time, these standards become integral components of women's body-modification habits. To conform with established social codes regulating femininity brings social favor, to resist or challenge these codes elicits marginalization as an outsider (Atkinson 2003:250).

Social disapproval serves as a means of encouraging women to *negotiate* their tattooing selections in a manner that allows them to stay within the realm of socially sanctioned body modification, and in a way that supports the continuation of existing gender relations.

However, while current female tattooing is still more heavily regulated than male tattooing in terms of 'cultural permissiveness' (Atkinson 2003), tattooing can also be read on the female body in the context of *resistance* (Atkinson 2002, Pitts 2003). In her study on extreme or spectacular body modifications, Pitts discusses how female body projects can also be harnessed as an opportunity for the tattooee to resist conventional female gender roles:

Some women have described their body art as a way to rebel against male dominance and to "reclaim" power over their own bodies. In creating scarred, branded, pierced, and heavily tattooed bodies, they aim to reject the pressures of beauty norms and roles of "proper" femininity. (Pitts 2003:3).

The themes of power and control discussed in the previous section come into play here in the sense that the kinds of decisions women make about getting tattooed may be a way to reclaim power over their own bodies, and establish their bodies as resistant displays of self.

The literature suggests a continuum for female tattooing, then, whereupon the resistant female body is situated at one end, a conforming (or non-tattooed) female body is situated at the other end, and the negotiated female body rests

somewhere in the middle. Women choose through the decisions they make about tattoos to either conform to, defy, or negotiate the social and political expectations within which they operate. Female body projects serve as key social signifiers that are viewed through the lens of tattooee gender, and as such tattooing upon the female body is most often categorized as either negotiated or resistant. The concept of negotiated or resistant tattooing will be central to my analysis.

### **The Literature on the Female Body**

Another body of literature that is relevant to the questions that I am asking in this study is the literature that focuses on the female body and sexuality more broadly. Studies regarding the corporeal performance of gender have increased over recent years, with many studies emphasizing current standards of female beauty and body size (Faludi 1991, Findlay 1996, Wolf 2002) as well as the extent to which the maintenance of the ideal female body and bodily adornment has become an all consuming project for young women (Brunburg 1997). Additionally there are literatures on the female body in relation to the ‘morality’ of the physical fitness craze (Pronger 2002, Wolf 2002), the female body in relation to motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 2004, Young 2003), the increasing sexualization of the female body in North American society (Brunburg 1997, Levy 2005, Wolf 2002), and the informal social control of female sexuality more broadly speaking (Klesse 2005, Lee 2003, Queen 1997, Ritchie and Barker 2006, Stein 2006, Tolman 2003, Wilkins 2004, Young 2003). Within this literature there are two themes that are particularly pertinent to the issues I will take up later in this thesis. They have to do with i) the female body norm in relation to beauty and social status; and ii) female sexuality in the context of moral regulation and informal social control.

#### *i) Social Norms: The Female Body, Beauty and Social Status*

Accompanying the rise in interest in feminism and the sociology of the body more generally, there has been increasing academic interest in ‘the female body norm’ and the extent to which the idealized version of the female body can be linked with broader issues of gender politics. Various studies on beauty and physical fitness have found a link between corporeal expectations for women and the symbolic meanings that are said to be associated with this ‘ideal’ feminine body. In discussing physical fitness and body modification technologies, Pronger argues that women are socially encouraged to have “smaller bodies, to be less aggressive in sport, weaker, [and] more passive” (Pronger 2002:182). Findlay also discusses the normative expectations for the female body, suggesting that:

Metaphorically, today's ideal favours a female body that is tightly controlled and takes up little space, limiting the social territory that women can command. It emphasizes a hairless, adolescent, sexually immature, and powerless body" (Findlay 1996:175-6).

The ideal feminine appearance encompasses a series of expectations for how women should look, but more importantly, it also encompasses various expectations regarding the "social territory" of women (1996:175-6). Simply put, men are expected to engage in body modification practices that serve to develop an image as a strong and physically powerful individual, while women are expected to engage in body modification practices that maintain an entirely different image of feminine 'beauty' – one that emphasizes not only women's smaller *physical* size relative to men, but also a *symbolic* size difference that reflects their diminished political power (Wolf 2002).

Wolf argues that the "*The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*" (her emphasis 2002:14). There are important political implications to appearance that go well beyond how women represent themselves in a corporeal sense (Faludi 1991, Wolf 2002). The ideal for female beauty requires women to not only look female (small, dainty, and powerless), but also requires women to *be* feminine. The femininity that is prescribed by these socially sanctioned image norms portrays an individual female who is less aggressive than her male counterparts, less politically and economically driven, and less threatening in both mannerism and corporeal presentation (Faludi 1991, Wolf 2002).

For women, conformity with the beauty standard provides key access to social status, although it is suggested that such social status is limited at best (Faludi 1991, Weitz 2003, Wolf 2002). Beauty serves as "a form of capital" for women (Baudrillard 2005:280), a key consideration in relation to female body modification practices. The literature on the female body norm suggests that the beauty standard has important implications for the body modification practices of women on many levels, influencing (or limiting) the extent to which women are willing to stray from the norms of femininity through their bodily display (Brunburg 1997, Wolf 2002). Ignoring the beauty standard is said to result in a loss of social status for young women, and for this reason the beauty standard becomes an important consideration in analyzing the social perceptions of the female tattooed body.

## *ii) Female Sexuality and Informal Social Control*

The final theme that needs to be covered in relation to this thesis concerns the social sexualization of the female body in a broad sense, and the use of the promiscuity label as a threat to the social status of women. The literature in this area discusses female sexuality mostly in terms of behavioral practices, but the



approval/disapproval linked with various sexual practices can also be applied to an analysis of corporeal representation, especially when that corporeal representation is believed to be indicative of a person's involvement in certain sexual practices.

Research on the sexualization of the female body has become much more prominent since the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, and various attitudes towards female sexuality and the body have played themselves out within the realm of feminist academic literature. Levy refers to the literature on female sexuality over the last forty years as the culmination of the 1970s 'sex wars' or 'pornography wars', wherein radical feminist and liberal feminist thought conflicted on the topic of both the sexuality and the bodily representations of women (Levy 2005:62). Levy argues that this dissent on the topic of sexuality – mainly relating to what forms of female sexuality are appropriate or inappropriate - has contributed to the development of what she refers to as "raunch culture" (2005). It is suggested that in a raunch culture women are objectified, and indeed contribute to their own objectification, by 'buying into' the fallacy that to be sexy is to be empowered (2005). Within this argument promiscuity is understood as a given, rather than a social construct, with the 'sexy' display of the body interpreted as women 'buying into' a false sense of empowerment. The concept of a raunch culture is interesting on many levels, and it is a concept to which I will return later in discussing social attitudes towards the female tattooed body in relation to sexuality.

There is also a body of literature that focuses on female sexuality more specifically as a social construct - both in terms of assumed heterosexuality and the social value that is attributed to monogamous relationships (Klesse 2005, Ritchie and Barker 2006). Through analyzing the various discourses surrounding sexuality, including but not limited to the concepts of monogamy, bisexuality, and multiple partnerships, it has been argued that "Promiscuity discourses establish a disciplinary regime of control and self-control and an effective form of social punishment" in relation to female desire and sexual experimentation (Klesse 2005:450). Others have observed that this is a particularly gendered process that serves to control the sexually liberal, and more specifically the *female* sexually liberal: "Terms like 'slut' have conventionally been used to reinforce the double standard of sexual behaviour (where men's promiscuous behaviour is celebrated and women's is punished)" (Ritchie and Barker 2006:591). Within this framework attitudes towards sexuality are said to be enculturated within us - producing social discourses on promiscuity that then impact women's lives. This body of literature engages primarily with the concept of female 'promiscuity' as an active label rather than an inherently deviant behaviour, a label that is applied primarily to women.

The application of *labels* can serve as potential mechanisms for the informal social control of minority groups. To this extent, the promiscuity label is discussed in the context of constructionism and informal social control through multiple references to 'shaming' as a key arsenal in the social control of women's

bodies. Stein refers to the current social climate as “a culture of shame” (Stein 2006:10) wherein women are expected to walk a fine line between the requirement to appear sexually attractive and the fear of treading into the realm of the sexually loose. ‘Shaming’ thus acts as a means of controlling women’s actions, for the shame of the “whore stigma” (Klesse 2005:449) is an especially powerful means of informal social control. Wilkin’s discusses the power of the label specifically in relation to young women’s lives:

Girls who violate construction of proper femininity are heavily stigmatized... fear of being labeled a “slag” (slut, ho, or hootchie in the United States) constrains young women’s behavior in a number of ways – by keeping them from going to a variety of public places, from walking alone, from dressing too provocatively, from talking to too many boys. *The power of the label* is that it can be applied at any time for reasons that seldom have anything to do with sexual behavior. To avoid the potentially ruinous label, young women must constantly manage their self-presentations, shelving their own freedom and desires. (my emphasis, Wilkins 2004: 331).

Goffman’s concept of *stigmatization* (1963) comes to mind here, wherein an individual becomes socially excluded on the basis of a constructed social stigma. In the context of the literature on female sexuality, the stigmatizing label that women are at risk of acquiring is the label of ‘promiscuous’. As Klesse argues, “the allegation of being promiscuous may have particularly serious consequences in some people’s social lives and [may] thoroughly affect their standing in their different social environments.” (Klesse 2005:459). The promiscuity label has the potential for the informal social control of women’s sexual behaviour (as in the case of bisexual communities), as well as the potential to control women’s body modification choices.

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Having reviewed the relevant literature, I would like to take a moment to situate my study and the questions that I am asking in relation to this literature. First, this study focuses not on the spectacular, but on more mainstream practices of tattooing among young adults. Spectacular bodies (extreme tattooing projects) have drawn most of the attention in scholarly analysis on body modifications. There has been only limited analysis of more mainstream versions of tattooing, especially as they relate to the *female* tattooed body. Since women are much less likely than are men to take part in spectacular body modifications (Atkinson 2002, Atkinson 2003), this has resulted in a situation wherein the female tattooed body has not received much attention at all, specifically mainstream female tattooing. In recognizing this as a gap in the literature, I would argue that the study of

mainstream tattooed bodies, and the social labels that become attached to these mainstream appropriations of tattooing, is an area that is worthy of study in relation to the female body politic.

Second, promiscuity as it relates to women has been studied primarily in relation to sexual preference and sexual behaviour, with very little attention having been paid to the physical display of *the body* in the same context. This has resulted in a gap in understanding how social control is exerted in relation to representations of self through bodily adornment. The idea of promiscuous bodies, in relation to current renditions of female tattooing as well as other representations of self, is an area that deserves more attention in the literature on female sexuality.

Since these questions cannot be understood without considering the social status of women as a minority group within society, and how the corporeal representations of self can be shaped and controlled by overarching social structures, this dimension will also be addressed in this thesis. In other words, I see my thesis making a contribution at the point at which the literatures on female bodies, female sexuality and gender politics intersect.

This thesis addresses the following questions:

- i) To what extent is tattooing interpreted differently upon the female body than it is upon the male body?
- ii) What are some of the major ways in which female tattooed bodies are interpreted (What are the various labels that are applied to the female tattooed body)?
- iii) What tattoos on the female body fall under the categorization of 'negotiated' tattoos (or tattoos that are understood to be more conventionally feminine)?
- iv) What tattoos on the female body fall under the categorization of 'resistant' tattoos (or tattoos that are understood to be less conventionally feminine)?
- v) What is the *tramp stamp*, and what are the various interpretations that are associated with this tattoo selection?
- vi) Is the *tramp stamp* a negotiated tattoo or a resistant tattoo?
- vii) What can these reactions, perceptions, and labels relating to female tattooing tell us about the social context within which women are operating?

## Methodology

To explore the above questions I have collected a triangulated data set from university students (both undergraduate and graduate) at a university in Southern Ontario. Data collection involved the use of both interviews and an online survey questionnaire. The interviews provided an in-depth understanding of how participants understand tattoos on the female body and the extent to which these understandings may impact their body modification choices. The questionnaire allowed me to explore the extent to which the themes and experiences discussed in the interviews are reflected in a larger population of undergraduate students. Additionally, while there are various academic studies that have approached the study of body modification practices using participant observation and/or interviewing (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000, Pitts 2003, Sanders 1989), there are relatively few that have taken a quantitative approach to the topic. While limited, then, the survey is a step in documenting how widespread certain views about tattoos may be among young people, and among university students more specifically.

### *Data Collection: Interviews*

Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2007, with each interview lasting 1-2 hours. Interview participants were recruited from a Southern Ontario university using both recruitment flyers posted in various areas around campus (Appendix C) as well as by word of mouth. Those who were interested in participating in the interviews contacted me by email, whereupon a meeting was arranged to conduct the interview. The sample consisted of 32 participants, ranging in age from 19 to 50. Of these 32 participants, 18 were female and 14 were male. Twenty-four of the participants were tattooed, while 8 did not have tattoos. Twenty-one of the students were undergraduates, while 11 were graduate students. The students represented all of the faculties on campus, including Social Sciences, Humanities, Engineering, Health Sciences, and Business.

Two open-ended interview schedules were used, one that was developed specifically for those interview participants who had tattoos, and one for those interview participants who were not tattooed (Appendix E and F). For those who were tattooed, the questions focused mainly on the stories behind their tattoos, the location of their tattoos, tattoo size, thematic imagery, and how various people in their lives have responded to their tattoos. For those who did not have tattoos, the questions focused on their attitudes towards tattooing, why they do not have tattoos, and how the various members of their lives feel about tattooing in terms of approval or disapproval. Both tattooed and non-tattooed interviewees were also asked what they thought about the tattooing of others, as well as their views on tattooing more generally. These questions focused on media representations of tattooing, how they feel the tattooed male and female body is interpreted by

others, and the degree to which tattoos were seen as a performance of hyper-masculinity, hyper-femininity, or as an expression of dissent with conventional gender roles.

Each interview was recorded with the consent of the interviewee (See Appendix D for consent form). The MP3 recordings were transcribed, and the interview data was analyzed for predominant themes. Interview participants were provided with a pseudonym for the purposes of referencing specific transcripts (See Appendix G for interviewee name index).

#### *Data Collection: Online Questionnaire*

Using the themes identified in the interview data, I then created an online questionnaire on surveymonkey.com (See Appendix J for questionnaire and the accompanying consent form). Participants for this portion of the research were also recruited from within the university population. However, for the questionnaire I restricted myself to the undergraduate population so that I could more easily try to draw a representative sample. I used the online university course calendar as a sampling frame, focusing only on the undergraduate courses that were available in the autumn term of 2007. Courses removed from the list included those that were cross-referenced (to ensure that each course was only represented once in the sampling frame), as well as course listings that indicated thesis research, project development, or clinical practice, as these listings would not provide a classroom setting from which to recruit. A *systematic random sample* was developed from the list utilizing a random start. Seventy undergraduate courses were selected to take part in the research. Successful entry into 50 classrooms was required to meet the standards of the research design, therefore it was necessary to over-sample in the event that a) there was a professor who refused to allow me to recruit in his/her classroom; b) the classroom was not located as indicated in the course calendar; or c) the class had been cancelled.

In the end I recruited survey participants from 50 classrooms. In each of these classes, 20 participants were randomly selected from the class and provided with a survey flyer that invited them to take part in the research (Appendix I). In total 1000 flyers were distributed during October and early November of 2007. The flyer provided a website link to my webspace on the university website, where participants could then access the online survey. The survey was password protected to help ensure a representative sample based on the sampling frame. A password was provided on the flyers that were randomly distributed in each class.

The questionnaire (Appendix J) asked participants a variety of questions depending upon whether they indicated that they were tattooed or not. For tattooed participants, the questions asked about the number of tattoos they have, the size and location of their tattoos, how they would rate it them terms of masculinity/femininity, and visibility, among other questions. Non-tattooed participants were asked about the reasons why they do not have tattoos. Finally

both tattooed and non-tattooed participants were asked a variety of questions relating to how they understand tattooing on the bodies of others specifically in relation to gender.

The online survey was closed on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2007. By that date a total of 294 students had responded. Of this group 204 participants were female (72.6%), 77 participants were male (27.4%), and 68 participants were tattooed (23%). (See Appendix L pages 160-64 for information about participant religion, ethnic background, socio-economic status, university program, and year of program).

### *Additional Methodological Considerations*

One of the interesting aspects of conducting research on body modifications is the potential for the body modification choices - or lack thereof - of the researcher to potentially sway the data collection process. Several academic researchers who have studied tattooing through participant observation and in-depth interviewing are tattooed themselves, and have argued that the display of their tattooing has served to open doors for them in regards to their research within the tattoo community (Atkinson 2003, DeMello 2000, Irwin 2003, Sanders 1989). While this is easy to understand, especially in relation to the study of spectacular bodies, I would argue that in the context of my current research on more mainstream tattooing, my *not* having tattoos proved to be beneficial as well. This was particularly the case when it came to eliciting responses from those who were not positively inclined towards particular tattoos or tattoo styles. Often participants would stop mid-sentence, before expressing their point of view, to double check my tattoo status:

*Greg (age 26):* I don't like when people get trendy things and you know, like... do you have tattoos?

*Researcher:* no.

*Greg:* okay I don't want to offend you!

*Researcher:* you won't offend me <laughs>

I would argue that *having* tattoos as a researcher in this particular context could potentially have impacted participant honesty to the extent that they may have inaccurately represented their impressions of different tattooing styles, particularly when those tattooing styles could be linked with *strong opinions* on the part of the participant:

*Researcher:* can you tell me more about the lower back tattoo?  
I want to hear more about them...

*Dana (age 19):* oh I hate them. <pause> I hope you don't have one!

In such instances it became evident that while having tattoos might have been useful in opening doors to discussion about extreme body modifications, in the context of this particular research it was actually more useful to *not* have tattoos, as participants were less likely to censor themselves or the attitudes that they felt might potentially have offended a tattooed researcher.

It is also worth mentioning that the focus that emerged in this study on the *tramp stamp* is attributable to the participants' own interest in this particular phenomenon. I chose not to incorporate questions specifically referencing this label or this particular tattoo location into the interview schedule because I felt it might bias the study and 'lead' participants in directions they might otherwise not have gone. If the issue of the *tramp stamp* came up in the interviews at all, it did so because participants themselves brought it into the conversation. When this happened, I would take advantage of the opportunity to probe further, asking about their impressions of the *tramp stamp* and the women who bear them.

An additional consideration was whether to use incentives to encourage participation. I decided against the use of incentives for the interviews for several reasons: It is commonly believed that incentives are not necessary for volunteer interviews, for having an opportunity to talk about oneself and one's life can be a particularly cathartic experience. Furthermore, specifically with reference to tattooing, it has been observed that participants generally enjoy talking about their tattoos (DeMello 2000), rendering such an incentive largely unnecessary. For the survey however, I felt that an incentive was necessary to increase the response rate above the relatively low rate of 10% that is typical for online surveys. I offered survey participants a chance to participate in a draw for a \$100.00 gift certificate from the campus bookstore as an incentive. At the end of the online questionnaire they were redirected to a separate and secure webpage where they could enter into the contest while maintaining anonymity in their survey participation (Appendix K). While the response rate for this online survey at 30% was well above the typical 10%, it is difficult to say whether this was directly attributable to the incentive offered.

The statistical limitations of this study include a relatively small  $n$  for the online questionnaire. While 294 participants is a reasonable number with which to use inferential statistics, only 68 of these survey participants were tattooed. For these participants, while descriptive statistics could still be useful, I hesitate to claim that they are generalizable to a larger population. The relatively low response rate of approximately 30% for the online questionnaire raises additional questions about the representativeness of the data. Furthermore it is possible that the survey data over-represents those students who consistently attend their

lectures, and those who arrive on time, as the recruitment for participants was executed in the classroom and generally within the first ten minutes of lecture.

Finally I would like to acknowledge that the data holds various other stories waiting to be told, including but not limited to: the association between tattooing and aggression, the display of hyper-masculinity through tattooing, the extent to which physical or medical risk perception plays a role in tattoo decisions, a more detailed analysis of the “butch” stereotypes in relation to the performance of lesbianism, and the social risks of tattooing in relation to employment. Due to the limited scope of this study I am only able to tell one small part of the story, and as such this study will focus on female tattooing as either negotiated or resistant – with a chapter focusing specifically on sexual interpretations and the *tramp stamp* in this context.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Negotiation and Resistance in Female Tattooing**

The following chapter discusses several of the various themes that have emerged throughout the course of data collection in relation to how the female tattooed body is interpreted by others. In the interest of understanding the female tattooed body in relation to sexual interpretations and the *tramp stamp* specifically (Chapter 2), we must first critically analyze the various implicit understandings that inform young adults' perceptions of the female tattooed body. These perceptions are developed within a framework of tacit tattooing 'rules', wherein different forms of tattooing are broadly considered to be appropriate or inappropriate on the female body.

The following chapter focuses on some of the specific issues that female tattooees are expected to navigate in selecting 'appropriate' tattoos, or in choosing not to become tattooed at all - issues that can broadly be related back to the concepts of negotiation and resistance. Specifically, I take a detailed look at: i) the perceived masculinity of tattooing, and the potential ways in which female tattooees can mitigate this masculinity through the selection of 'feminine' tattoos ii) the dialogue regarding the visibility or concealment of female tattooing, and how visibility impacts the 'appropriateness' or 'inappropriateness' of various tattoo projects and iii) how the mainstream tattooed body is judged on the basis of what is perceived to be 'meaningless' tattoos, and why this is important aspect of understanding the female tattooed body.

### Mitigating the Masculinity of Tattooing – ‘Feminine’ Tattooing

The longstanding historical association between tattooing and masculinity is clearly evident in the literature on tattooing, to the extent that it has almost become an assumed association. The data gathered for this study showed, however, that this association also has important ramifications for the ways in which female tattooed bodies are read and understood. In discussing their perceptions of the female tattooed body, one common theme that was discussed by the interviewees relates to the masculinity that is traditionally associated with tattoos, and the extent to which this association with masculinity could be linked with the disapproval of some female tattoo selections. While some female bodies are the object of disapproval because of their tattoos, there are a series of negotiations available to female tattooees whereby the careful selection of tattoo imagery, size and location serves a way of ‘feminizing’ their tattoos in the eyes of others. In the following section, the disapproval of the female tattooed body associated with the concept of tattooing as a masculine practice will be discussed, along with the way in which the careful selection of tattoo imagery, size and location can serve as a way of mitigating this disapproval for female tattooees.

The link between tattooing and the display of powerful *masculine* bodies was a concept that was repeatedly referenced in the interviews, often in relation to media representations of tattooing. When asked to describe how they see tattoos represented on television and in movies, participants primarily linked tattoo representations with masculinity:

I remember back when *Dusk From Dawn*<sup>1</sup> first came out, and that guy had a huge huge tattoo. He has a huge tribal sleeve that comes up on to his neck. My friend got the exact tattoo because he thought it was the greatest thing ever, whatever. But he [the character] was like this hyper-masculine gun slinging shooting vampires... and *Blade*<sup>2</sup> [another character that is] heavily tattooed, shooting vampires. Jack, no one messes with him, he’s half human half vampire. He’s a freak. (*Mike, age 26*).

Another participant indicated that tattooing is generally presented in the context of ‘tough’ masculinity:

[I]t’s the whole persona that they’re presenting, and generally when they present a person with a tattoo on them, it’s like everything comes together where it’s like this is the bad guy, or the strong guy, or the outgoing guy who is going to macho his way through it. It’s a power symbol. (*Amanda, age 23*).

Similar references linked tattooing in fictional television and movies with the portrayal of the male body, and more specifically, a male body that is understood

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<sup>1</sup> Sic. Reference: *From Dusk Till Dawn*. (1996). Directed by Robert Rodriguez. Alliance Atlantis.

<sup>2</sup> Reference: *Blade*. (1998). Directed by Stephen Norrington. Amen Ra Films.

to be physically and psychologically powerful, often violent and clearly masculine. While interview participants would commonly talk about *male* fictional television and movie characters who are tattooed, they could rarely think of female fictional characters with similarly prominent tattoos. The interviewees indicated that they largely see tattooed bodies being represented in the media in a masculine way.

This association between traditional versions of tattooing and masculinity is an interesting one when one considers the extent to which male and female tattooees experience differing levels of approval and disapproval over becoming tattooed. While 65% of the male tattooees indicated that their family members have reacted positively to their tattoo(s), only 36% of female tattooees indicated the same (Appendix M tables 7 and 8). Similarly, when survey respondents were asked whether anyone had ever tried to discourage them from acquiring a tattoo, 40% of the male participants indicated that they had experienced the discouragement of others, while by comparison 53% of women indicated that they experienced similar discouragement. Clearly these disparities suggest that while tattooing may have increased in popularity among women (Atkinson 2002, Fisher 2002, Hawkes 2004, Pitts 2003), female tattooees still experience heavier social sanctions than do male tattooees when they choose to become tattooed.

The extent to which the historical association between tattooing and masculinity plays a role in at least some of this disapproval was confirmed in the interview data. Female tattooees made frequent reference to the association in relation to their own body art selections. Many young women described the disapproval that they have experienced over their decision to become tattooed in the context of the masculinity that is commonly connected with tattoos:

I mean my dad has tattoos, and he's a sailor. So he was like, 'I don't think this [your tattoo] is a really good idea.' And I was like... 'you have this tattoo on your arm that says death before dishonor, with a dagger and an eagle on it, lets talk about what this means for you! And you got it when you were young, and drunk in the navy, and obviously you must have some sort of connection with tattoos as well. So why can't I share that sort of connection?' (*Aimee, age 23*).

Amy goes on to explain her father's disapproval of her tattooing by suggesting that her father views his tattoo work as representative of his identity in the Navy, a "masculine" identity, an identity that he strongly feels is not appropriate for her. In linking her father's disapproval with his understanding of tattooing as a 'masculine' Navy identity, and thus inappropriate for her, Amy is relating his disapproval to his expectations for her as a young woman.

Another participant made reference to a more traditional perspective of masculine tattooing as associated with the Navy to explain why she hides her tattoos from her grandfather:

My one grandfather, he's a pretty conservative guy. He probably just wouldn't understand why I got it done. He just

wouldn't understand it I think... He was in the Navy, and was in WWII. So I'm sure he was exposed to it [tattooing], but I don't think he would understand why, *as a young woman*, I would want to go do that. (my emphasis, *Jan, age 23*).

These quotes demonstrate that tattooing is still often interpreted within the context of traditional masculine tattooing by many of the people who feature prominently in day-to-day lives and interactions of female tattooees, and that this connotation has an impact on the levels of approval and disapproval that women face when they choose to get, or are considering the acquisition of a tattoo. Alternatively, the young men I interviewed assumed a certain level of social permissiveness in relation to their body modification projects (similar to the approval experienced by the male survey participants). Indeed, tattooing is often discussed in the literature as a rite of passage for male tattooees (Atkinson 2003). Women, on the other hand, experience strongly gendered messages of social disapproval regarding the ways in which they choose to modify their bodies.

While tattooing was broadly associated with masculinity, however, there are certain tattoos that are understood to be more inherently 'masculine' than others. Alternatively, there are tattoos that are considered to be more 'feminine', and were thus more likely to elicit approval on the body of a woman. For women to consider the possibility of negotiating their tattoo selections along these lines, however, they first must become adept at reading the tattooed bodies of others, as well as the reactions of others in relation to tattooing on both male and female bodies.

A form of tattooing consistently cited by interview participants as more 'masculine' is tattooing that includes large blocky, dark text that covers a considerable expanse of skin. One male tattooee, the bearer of such lettering on his stomach, had his black text tattoo mistaken for a jail-house tattoo by a rather shaken business associate during a company pool party. The participant explained this misunderstanding as the result of the portrayal of such tattoos in popular culture, "the media has portrayed it big time as Latino gangsters, 2 Pac<sup>3</sup> has it across his stomach, like gangster-gangster. They get them in jail supposedly" (*Mike, age 26*). Interestingly, when another participant was asked what he felt the reaction would be if a *woman* acquired a similar large black text tattoo on her arm (a familiar sight on the body of young men), the response was incredulity:

I'd think she's crazy. <laughs> Yeah. Well not crazy, but into the Indy scene. Her lifestyle is probably not your stereotypical wear a nice dress. She probably dresses how she wants. (*Ritchie, age 21*).

This reference to 'crazy' came up several times throughout the course of the interviews - consistently when interviewees were asked to describe how they

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<sup>3</sup> Tupac Shakur, an American rap artist: [<http://www.2paclegacy.com>] accessed 11/17/08.

might interpret a female body inscribed with tattoos that are considered to be masculine tattoos. Mike clarifies that women with overtly masculine tattoos are viewed in this manner because in selecting ‘masculine’ tattoos they are understood to be “*Not feminine*. More independent perhaps.” (my emphasis, *Mike, age 26*).

The concept of the crazy female is underpinned by the implicit understanding that to tattoo one’s female body with ‘male’ body art (in terms of imagery, size, or location) is to take part in an irreversible act of destruction in relation to a woman’s femininity, for “this woman, like she’s desecrating her beautiful body by marking it with something that’s not feminine” (*Evan, 27*). Another participant stated: “Honestly if I see a woman with a lot of tattoos I think oh my god what was she thinking, she barely looks like a girl anymore” (*Kim, age 21*). In the following quote, one participant described the reaction of her family after she acquired a tattoo on her ribcage comprised of more traditionally masculine imagery of a star with crown and ribbon:

[They say to me] ‘You’re such a beautiful girl, why would you want to destroy your body or wreck it like that?’ And I don’t see it as wrecking, I’m not taking hunks of skin out. If anything it’s kind of showing off another side of me. And you know, making my body my image the way I want it to be. (*Ashley, age 21*).

Such quotes demonstrate that as a means of avoiding the damaging stigma of pathologization that is associated with being ‘crazy’ and with ‘destroying’ one’s normative feminine body, female tattooees experience pressure to undergo a certain amount of negotiation in selecting their body projects to ensure that such projects are not interpreted as being too masculine in nature.

The extent to which young women are aware of the need to negotiate their tattoo selections along the lines of gender was obvious in the ways that they talked about tattooing. Dana discussed her ‘feminine’ flower tattoos in this way:

[Y]ou really have to think that there’s a complete difference between what you find acceptable and what society finds acceptable. I’m completely aware of what society finds acceptable. I don’t like it, but I’m aware of it. And I do base some of my decisions [on that]. (*Dana, age 19*).

In some cases participants cited the experiences of others, friends and family members, indicating that through others’ experiences they learned about how their tattoos could potentially be read by others in a symbolic sense. One participant described the full tattoo sleeve acquired by her female friend in this way. A tattoo sleeve refers to when a tattooee covers an entire expanse of the arm - usually from shoulder to elbow but occasionally encompassing the entire arm - with a variety of tattoos that blend together. These tattoos are often, but not always, of one particular theme. As a form of tattooing that is more commonly considered to be appropriate for men (Appendix L table 29), Jenna discussed the tattoo sleeve acquired by her female friend by stating, “it’s risky because, it’s like people might

not even date you if you have that tattoo” (*Jenna, age 27*). This identification of a social risk was echoed by Aimee (age 23) who discussed the response of her family to her ‘masculine’ bicep and full-back tattoos, “My family just thinks I’m crazy... They shake their head, and say you’re going to regret that in five years”. She summed up her family reaction as, “good girls don’t get tattoos. And how are you ever going to find a husband, Aimee, with *those kind of tattoos* on your body?”. A non-tattooed male participant likewise suggested:

If it was an enormous sleeve tattoo? Yeah, that’s not the type of girl I want to take home to Mom. But it’s not the type of girl I would be dating anyways. Not on a knee jerk reaction. You never know, you might meet them and talk to them and go ‘wow’. But it’s that initial thought right. (*Dan, age 28*).

Thus, the social risk of acquiring a tattoo that is seen as too ‘masculine’, and not appropriate for the female body can be substantial, especially within the realm of personal relationships. The possibility of disapproval in both familial and romantic relationships serves as a warning to female tattooees and to women considering tattoos to avoid extreme body projects in general, as well as particular tattoos that fall outside of the realm of female normative appearance.

If ‘male’ tattoos are to be avoided, but ‘female’ tattoos are more acceptable selections for women, what types of tattoos fall into the acceptable category for women? The tattoos that were understood to be more “appropriate” for women (*Lindsay, age 21*) were the same tattoos that were said to be “more girly” (*Meg, 21*). Any tattoo that might be described as “cute” (*Lindsay, age 21*) or “pretty” (*Kim, age 21*) fell into this category. The definition of what tattoos were considered cute, pretty, and thus feminine was often situated by participants as the exact opposite of typical male tattoos:

I think a lot of the guys have huge ones across their back, really large. Or on their arms. A lot of the girls are definitely smaller, and the guys are more almost gory. The imagery is different. Whereas all the girls I can think of they’re flowers and butterflies and stars. *Girly things*. (my emphasis, *Tracy, age 25*).

Overall, the interviewees identified three areas of difference for ‘appropriate’ male and female tattoos – imagery, location and size. In terms of imagery, while more aggressive imagery (“gory” things) could be considered typical of male tattoos, female tattoos were more likely to consist of more feminine docile imagery such as butterflies, flowers, and stars. In terms of location, while men were expected to have tattoos on their arms back and chest, female tattoos were expected to be located on the pelvic/hip area, the lower back, the back of the shoulder, or the ankles. And in terms of size, male tattoos were suggested to be larger, while female tattoos were expected to be substantially smaller. These assumptions about ‘appropriate’ female tattooing were reflected in the survey data as well. Both the survey data on what types of tattoos are broadly considered to be socially appropriate for women (Appendix L table 30), and the survey data on

the types of tattoos young women *actually acquire* (Appendix M table 1) suggest that the locations and sizes of female tattoos referenced by the interviewees are accurate. Thus based upon both the interviews and the survey data it can be suggested that ‘appropriate’ female tattoos are those that are small, comprised of feminine imagery, and are located on the pelvic/hip area, the lower back, the back of the shoulder, or the ankles.

While the survey data indicated that tattoo imagery, size and location are key ways in which women practice tattooing differently from men, the interviewees clarified that this difference could be interpreted as providing a way for women to mitigate the potential disapproval of their tattoos. Whereas male tattoos display “toughness” (*Jenna, age 27*) and “street cred” (*Amanda, 23*), ‘appropriate’ female tattoos display “girlyness” (*Meg, age 21*) and “femininity” (*Katie, age 22*). Any tattoos that deviated substantially from these tattooing norms were viewed as socially inappropriate, and would likely elicit strong censure, as the following quotation demonstrates:

I think if it was a more masculine tattoo he [my father] probably would have been a lot more upset about it, I think. Umm, mostly because I think the reason that my family was okay with it and the reason people are kind of like oh yeah, it’s cute, the fact that is more sort of related to who I am, and it’s more appropriate for who I am. (*Lindsay, age 21*).

Tattooing was thus explained by participants along the lines of gender, with the measure of approval or disapproval experienced directly in relation to whether the tattoo was considered to be ‘appropriate’ in terms of the gender of the tattooee. Lindsay’s experience can be understood within this context, for while her family was opposed to tattooing, her tattoo of choice was deemed to be more socially appropriate for her female gender role, and thus the tattoo itself became less of a problem.

Another participant who similarly indicated that her family and friends approved of her more ‘feminine’ tattoo selections suggested that:

I could potentially get a skull if I really wanted to. I don’t like that, but if I were to get a skull, it would probably be more feminine because I would want it to work with my personality and what I like, and the look of my other tattoos. So it might be a very cute looking skeleton skull. <laughs> (*Ashley, age 21*).

The link between type of tattoo and societal reactions were supported by the survey data. A crosstabulation of the self rating of the female respondents’ tattoos (as masculine, feminine, or neutral) with their experiences of familial approval/disapproval indicates that those who have more ‘feminine’ tattoos are those who have received the most approval for their tattoo selections (Appendix N, table 1). This data supports the idea that for female tattooees, the desire to negotiate the perceived masculinity/femininity of their tattoo selections can be directly related to the expectations/interpretation of others, and to the social risk that is associated with disapproval.

As women try to negotiate the traditional association between tattooing and masculinity, it is clear that they often use the careful selection of ‘feminine’ tattoo imagery, size and location as a means of mitigating the potential social disapproval that they feel they may experience in their interactions with family, friends, and potential romantic partners. Further, this process of tattoo negotiation was both recognized, and to varying extents practiced, amongst the women I interviewed throughout the course of the research. To the extent that more traditional versions of tattooing were understood by the interviewees to be unfeminine, it is clear that underlying social norms regarding the performance of femininity (and what femininity should look like) have a very tangible impact upon the level of approval/disapproval experienced by female tattooees. This association between feminizing one’s tattoos, and thus eliciting approval, has a clear impact on the ways in which the female tattoo body will be interpreted (either positively or negatively) by others, and thus also has an impact on the decision making of young women when it comes to selecting their tattoos.

The data suggests that female tattooed bodies are held to a standard of approval that is different from male tattooed bodies, and it is this difference that we will reflect on throughout the course of this thesis. The requirement for women to mitigate the masculinity that has historically been associated with tattooing is thus of particular interest, especially as we begin to consider the relationship between feminine tattooing, tattoo visibility on the female body, and mainstream tattoo ‘meaning’. As such, the understanding that there are masculine and feminine ‘types’ tattooing, along with the related understanding that ‘feminine’ tattooing is more likely to be approved of on the female body, is an interesting association to which we will return later in the chapter.

### **Tattoo Visibility – Concealment vs. Communicative Power**

In addition to tattoo imagery, size, and location, the *visibility* of the tattoo on the female body was discussed by the interviewees as an important aspect of interpreting a woman’s tattoo as either appropriate or inappropriate. While it could be argued that the visibility of a tattoo can be considered an aspect of tattoo size and location (the location or size of a tattoo may impact how visible a tattoo is, for example), tattoo visibility can also stand alone in relation to concealment, and the ways in which concealment can operate as an aspect of negotiation in hiding tattoos that would otherwise be considered inappropriate on a female body (based upon their imagery, size, or location). The following section discusses the extent to which tattoo concealment is considered to be an issue in the selection of appropriate tattoos on the female body, and I will then discuss how tattoo visibility impacts the ways in which the female tattooed body is interpreted as either appropriate or inappropriate, negotiated or resistant.



In this study visibility was an issue that was raised by both male and female interviewees. However, most participants agreed that tattoo visibility is experienced differently by male and female tattooees. Concealment was discussed as more of a concern for young women, with participants suggesting that “with girls it’s more limited in the spots that you can get them” (*Ashley, age 21*). Similarly, Mike (*age 26*) concluded: “women are more likely to conceal their tattoos”. The suggestion that concealment is a requisite for female tattooing was clear as well in the survey data, with 85% of female tattooees self rating their own tattoos as less visible, and only 65% of male tattooees self rating their own tattoo projects as less visible by comparison (Appendix M tables 3 and 4).

Elaborating on the significance of tattoo visibility for men and women, one participant argued:

Many girls get them on their lower back, or I know a lot of girls get it right down on their pelvic bone, bikini line. So they’re mostly hid. Or on the inside of ankles. Where guys will get it on the outside of their leg, the calf. The outside shin part. Where girls get it on the inside more... other than on TV I’ve never seen a girl with tattoos on her knuckles. In person I’ve never met any girls with that. But I’ve met tons of guys with tattoos on their knuckles. So I think *the guys are more visible, the girls are more subtle about it.* (my emphasis, *Jess, age 21*).

Thus interview participants consistently indicated that tattoo visibility is different on the male body and the female body, with female tattooees either choosing locations that are less visible, or at the very least concealing the tattoos that would otherwise be in obvious locations, “all the women I know have small ones on their foot, or a lot of lower back. And they can be hidden more easily, where all the guys I know [their tattoos] are more visible” (*Tracy, age 25*).

The visibility of a woman’s tattoos, or more specifically their concealment, was also often associated with the femininity of the tattoo. Andrew (*age 21*) explains:

[My coworker] started showing me her tattoos, and she has all these tattoos except they are in these *really small concealable places*. She has a lower back one, the back of her neck, on her feet. I had never noticed them... they are all sort of *girl tattoos*, in the way they are more girly. One of them was maybe not lower back but over here on her hip, yeah. They’re more small.

Andrew’s comments show as well how the concealment of women’s tattoos – and the extent to which this concealment is interpreted as more ‘feminine’ – relates to the concepts of feminine tattoo size and location as discussed in the previous section. Within this framework tattoos that are small and in specific locations are viewed as easier to conceal, and are thus interpreted as “more girly” tattoos (*Andrew, age 21*) or “characteristically feminine” (*Meg, age 21*).

Participants also evinced a recognition of the fact that not only are concealed tattoos understood to be a more feminine acquisition, but the

concealment of a woman's tattoo is *also* associated with an increased likelihood of approval. Many participants made a distinction between having a tattoo, and "letting the entire world know that you have it" (*Jan, age 23*). For example, one participant explained that disapproval for her tattoos was minimal outside of family interactions because she chose to conceal them whenever she felt they were inappropriate. She explained that tattoos generally only elicit serious disapproval or social retribution "if you're going out and you're rebelliously showing them to people, you know like flaunting your tattoos and not listening to the rules, that sort of thing" (*Jan, age 23*). Another woman similarly indicated "if everyone knows I have a tattoo, that's fine, but if they're constantly seeing it that's kind of a different issue" (*Lindsay, age 21*). With statements such as these, a distinction is drawn between actually having the tattoos, and the extent to which tattoo visibility impacts the approval or disapproval of tattoos on the female body. These comments suggest that from participants' perspectives, for a woman to become tattooed is not an innately inappropriate act in and of itself, rather it is the act of becoming tattooed in an obvious location, or to display tattoos in open and blatant ways, that risks inviting social censure – especially for women.

Thus tattoo concealment was often discussed in the context of female tattoo selections as a consideration that helps to explain why certain tattoo locations are considered more *appropriate* than others on the female body. A visually obvious tattoo location or size can be interpreted as inappropriate, as "rebelliously showing them" or "flaunting" one's tattoos (*Jan, age 23*). One female participant – the bearer of a dark blocky text tattoo that was discussed in Chapter One as a 'masculine' style tattoo – explained that for women to sport such tattoos is often interpreted negatively as an attention seeking acquisition:

[They wonder] why do you have that? Is it for attention? Is that why you want it there? I think girls judge girls harder. Because that's what my sister said, she was like 'why did you get it on your wrist, do you want people to ask you about it?' And I said 'no I got it on my wrist because I want to be able to look at it and remember stuff.' (*Jess, age 21*).

The extent to which a visible tattoo on the female body, and especially a visible masculine tattoo, can be considered an inappropriate acquisition is best reflected in the disapproval commonly associated with the selection of such tattoos, "depending on who the person is I think it's [considered] dirtier for a girl to have a tattoo that's visible. People look at them as dirtier people. I don't know why." (*Jess, age 21*). And while visible tattoos on the female body have the potential to be interpreted negatively, concealed tattoos were viewed as more respectful, and thus more appropriate. In relation to this, the female tattooees in the interviews often discussed their tattoo concealment within a framework of "respect" (*Lindsay, age 21, Jan age 23*). One young woman stated that within her family dynamic "it's a sign of respect that I'm willing to hide it" (*Amber, age 22*). Thus it is clear that many women feel compelled to conceal their tattoos as a means of presenting themselves in a manner that is considered to be more 'appropriate' -

and thus more likely to be approved of by the various people with whom they interact - and that doing so can often be interpreted by themselves and others (such as their family members) within this framework of “respect” (*Lindsay, age 21*).

An important dimension of visibility and concealment, however, was the extent to which they are context specific. In other words, participants nuanced their discussion of visibility by arguing that there were appropriate situations or contexts to either show or conceal tattoos. For example, some participants were more inclined to conceal their tattoos during specific occasions or special events:

I’ve known girls who have put cover up over tattoos, and have bought special make up from tattoo companies to cover up their tattoos when they are out in places when they don’t want people to see them. They bought makeup for a ridiculous amount of money to cover up their tattoos in certain situations. (*Mike, age 26*).

Another participant likewise indicated:

Well, I think I remember going to weddings when I got a little bit older, and thinking, oh that doesn’t look very good on my ankle. You know? And thinking, I want to wear nylons. (*Marianne, age 36*).

In some cases, concealment was precipitated by being around others who disapproved of tattoos. This was the case for Marianne, whose tattoos are in visually prominent locations on both the side and top of her ankle, and she indicated that neither her family nor her boyfriend approved of her tattoos. She resolved the issue of the visibility of her tattoos, in conjunction with their dislike of tattoos, through the use of a heavy concealing makeup “I get this makeup from Clinique that’s really thick, and I cover it. You can’t even see it, I cover them” (*Marianne, age 36*). This allowed her to conceal what would otherwise be very visible tattoos on her ankles for special occasions, or for any other time that she desired not to show them, “If I’m going somewhere and I’m wearing a nice pair of Capri pants, I’ll cover them up” (*Marianne, age 36*). Clearly the concealment of a woman’s tattoo is something that is sometimes negotiated based upon the extent to which the tattoo is deemed as appropriate or inappropriate for the particular event that the woman is attending. Tattoos that might be considered appropriate for everyday wear may not be appropriate to have visible during events for which more conservative dress might be expected (such as a wedding), or when disapproving family members may be present.

The desire and perceived need to be able to conceal one’s tattoo even affected the type of tattoos that the women *selected* to begin with. As Ashley (*age 21*) argued:

I’m very low maintenance, so I don’t want there to ever really be a hassle in terms of having to hide my tattoo, in wearing like you know, go out of my way, and find additional things to cover it up. ‘Cause even in summer time I don’t want to have to wear

longer sleeves, or socks when I wouldn't have to. Because if I'm not comfortable, then there's really no point in getting it in that spot anyways.

Thus the concealment of tattoos is not simply something that women do through the use of clothing or makeup, but is rather something women actively consider in the selection of their tattoos as well. As one participant stated in relation to her visible tattoos:

I think if I had to do it differently I would have gotten one somewhere nobody could see. Not right out where... you know I don't think there's anything wrong with having one you know on your back, or somewhere where no one can see. But I got it in a really obvious spot where when you're wearing shorts and sandals, it's pretty obvious. You know? (*Marianne, age 36*).

Such statements clarify that women's tattooing not only takes place, but is also interpreted within a framework that identifies visible tattoos on a woman as too "obvious", and thus undesirable. Alternatively concealed tattoos are viewed as "more girly" (*Andrew, age 21*), and are thus considered more appropriate on the female body. The association of concealed tattoos with femininity, and the *approval* that is granted to these more concealed feminine tattoos, is thus one of the key ways in which female tattooed bodies are both interpreted and negotiated.

An interesting association that emerged through the course of the interviews was that in many cases the female participants who had feminine themed tattoos (based on imagery, size and location) were more likely to have them in visually obvious locations, while the tattoos that were more neutral or masculine in nature were often located in areas that were easily (if not always) concealed by clothing. One female participant, for example, described a 'masculine' four to five inch tattoo on her mid-back by stating:

I find I really like the eagle just because it's a really fierce looking eagle. I just think it's really cool. And that's kind of what I wanted it to be, I wanted it to be fierce, and independent, and strong, you know. And that's what the eagle means to the Native American people too, so that's what I want to be. I want to be a strong independent woman. (*Jan, age 23*).

The participant identified this particular tattoo as being more representative of her own identity, while suggesting that she felt her other tattoo (a small butterfly on the back of her shoulder) was less representative of who she was fundamentally. When asked why she chose the locations she did for each tattoo, she explained that the (hidden) eagle tattoo is "more personal to me, I kind of feel like it's something people don't need to see" (*Jan, age 23*).

Another female participant arrived at the interview in a conservative blazer coat and a turtle neck blouse. She revealed that her large breast tattoo - while comprised of heavily masculine tribal imagery - rarely elicited a negative response from others as she almost always chose to keep it concealed (*Angie, age 28*). Like Jan, Angie also had a more feminine themed tattoo - in her case a heart

and key – located in a more visually obvious area high up on the back of her shoulder. This was a common scenario provided by many female participants relating to their tattoos - masculine tattoos that could be socially read as unfeminine tattoos were often placed in less visible locations, and were described by the participants as “just for me” (*Jan, age 23*). In comparison, the tattoos that were more socially appropriate in terms of their perceived femininity were often in more prominent, more visible locations where they were easily viewed and read by others in the women’s day-to-day interactions. Within this framework, concealment becomes the means by which women may negotiate (through decreasing visibility) what would otherwise be considered an inappropriately *masculine* tattoo.

*Visible* tattoos on the female body were not only discussed within the context of the disapproval of others, however, and not all female participants were motivated to conceal their tattoos. One of the key ways in which the female tattooees who had more visible tattoos often discussed their tattoo projects was in relation to the concept of power - revealing that they had reasons for ignoring the tacit rules about tattoo visibility on the female body. One participant discussed her visible (and more masculine) wrist tattoo as an emotionally empowering acquisition specifically because of the visibility of the tattoo:

I wanted something that I could look at constantly. So it would remind me of my grandfather and how I should continue doing what I’m doing. And then when I came up with [the word] faith, I was going to get it put on the back of my neck. That was where I originally wanted it. And then I decided I was going to size it up with this one and get it put on my wrist, and then I could look at both of them whenever I needed it. I can see it, I don’t care if other people can see it, congratulations. It’s something I want to see. Especially the faith one, I definitely need to look at that one a lot. (*Jess, age 21*).

For Jess, it was more important to have her tattoo in her *own* line of vision than it was to protect herself against negative judgments. For other women, getting a visible tattoo was an act of defiance or resistance. In defying normative expectations they experienced a sense of personal and emotional power, with one woman discussing the acquisition of her very visible bicep tattoo as initiating “a feeling of power”. She goes on to explain, “Like this is a pain that I’m choosing, and I’m overcoming, and it’s something that’s marking me. It’s a very powerful moment” (*Aimee, age 23*).

Another discussion that linked visible tattoos with the concept of power related not only to the emotional empowerment of having the tattoo within one’s *own* line of vision, but also reflected on the potential for *others* to see one’s visible tattoo – and the extent to which the visibility of one’s tattoos can become a powerful means of communicating self. Within this framework, visible tattooing was understood as a proclamation of female independence, a statement of control that states that “It’s *my* body” to those who may view the tattoo (*Jess, age 21*).

One interview participant referred to the selection of her very visible collarbone tattoo as reflecting:

Some sort of agency. People are going to judge you by what you look like, although if you have taken the very deliberate step of changing what you look like, knowing that people are going to think things about you from it, or at least think something of it itself, then there is some sort of power in that. (*Amber, age 22*).

Thus it was suggested that the viewing of the tattoo by others, and the symbolic communication associated with that viewing, is what can provide women with a sense of “power” in relation to self-definition. Clearly this ‘viewing’ of one’s tattoo is impacted by the visibility of the tattoo itself, and as such tattoo visibility was a key aspect of the dialogue on power.

Related to this, the interviewees often discussed the tattoo-as-power on the female body in relation to the acquisition of highly visible tattoos that were *not* typical, more masculine, and were thus not as likely to be interpreted as overtly ‘feminine’ tattoo art. This is the case with Amber’s collarbone tattoo (*Amber, age 22*), and is even more so the case with Aimee’s tattoo on her bicep (*Aimee, age 23*) - a tattoo that is not commonly acquired by women (Appendix M table 1). A male participant confirmed this observation:

More men get the biceps, I guess it’s to show off muscles and to show off physical dominance.... I’ve definitely seen more guys with the ring around. And the shoulder too, more guys get that than girls. (*Greg, age 23*).

Here masculine tattooing in the visible location of the bicep is associated with power, “muscles” and “physical dominance” (*Greg, age 23*), displays that are considered to be more typical of male tattooing. Aimee’s choice of such a tattoo situates her tattoo selection as one that might invite the disapproval of others (due to the visibility of the location and the masculinity associated with the placement), but also as something that, as she indicated above, she experiences as empowering.

The visible tattoo as a symbol of power was not only felt by the female tattooees themselves, but was also recognized by those who ‘read’ the female tattooed body as well. Many of the interviewees (and not just the ones who had acquired such tattoos) suggested that the types of tattoos that are commonly viewed as more powerful - in terms of expressing dissent with appropriate ‘femininity’ - are highly visible tattoos that would more commonly be seen on a male body:

[I]f you [a woman] get it more on your arm it’s more, I don’t want to say abrasive, but for lack of a better word I’ll use that word. *It’s more up front about it*, and it’s more of a power thing. (*my emphasis, Katie, age 22*).

Another participant clarified the political implications of this tattoo location on the male versus the female body:

If guys get a bicep tattoo or an upper arm tattoo, it's drawing attention to his masculinity, to his arms. It has nothing to do with how good shape he is in or anything, it's just the way he's built. So for a girl to be doing that it's like you're challenging it, like look I've got a bicep too. It's masculinity. (*Meg, age 21*).

As Meg suggests, the selection of such a highly visible masculine tattoo by a woman is often read as a challenge. This challenge or resistance is both experienced as empowering by many female tattooees, and at the same time also elicits labels such as “too obvious” (*Marianne, age 36*), “dirtier” (*Jess, age 21*), “abrasive” (*Katie, age 22*), or rebellious (*Jan, age 23*) by many of the people who read their body. Alternatively, a masculine tattoo that is *less visible* (discussed above by Jan and Angie), receives little response due to the decreased exposure of the tattoo to others. As Jan states, it is not having the tattoo that is the issue, rather it is “going out and rebelliously showing them to people” that incites the disapproval of others (*Jan, age 23*). And as indicated above, it is not the acquisition of a *masculine* tattoo that is the primary issue either, but rather it is the communicative power that the masculine tattoo represents when this tattoo is *visible* to others.

Atkinson argues that tattoo concealment is more of a concern for women, while male tattooees experience a relatively higher amount of cultural permissiveness in relation to the visibility of their tattoos (2003). Both the survey participants and the interviewees in this study indicated that this is indeed the case, suggesting that tattoo visibility is not only practiced differently among men and women, but is also interpreted differently to the extent that visible tattoos on the female body are considered to be less appropriate. And while Hawkes suggests that women who acquire highly visible tattoos are faced with increased social risk (2004), the interviewees indicated that when visible tattoos are ‘feminine’ (in relation to imagery, size or location) the risk of disapproval is less, and when visible tattoos are ‘masculine’ the risk of disapproval is more.

The interview data thus indicated that tattoo concealment can be understood as a key way in which otherwise inappropriate tattoos can be negotiated (as in the case of concealing a tattoo that is interpreted as masculine while showing a more feminine tattoo). Further, tattoo visibility can also be understood within the context of communicative power, where female tattooees may refuse to conceal their tattoos, indeed may actively select tattoo locations that are intentionally more visible (and interpreted as more masculine) as a way of challenging dominant gender codes. Thus tattoo visibility can be understood as much more than simply the product of tattoo size and location, for a) tattoo visibility is sometimes *negotiated* as a way of concealing a tattoo that might otherwise elicit disapproval in terms of the selected imagery, size or location; and b) tattoo visibility is alternatively sometimes employed as an intentional *resistance* against the confines of this disapproval. Thus I would argue that women who choose to hide their tattoos are interpreted as selecting more

appropriate tattoos, while women who choose to place their tattoos in more prominent locations (especially if they are ‘masculine’ tattoos) are seen as selecting inappropriate tattoos.

### **Mainstream Tattooed Bodies: The Role of ‘Meaning’ and ‘Meaninglessness’**

While the imagery, size, location, and visibility of a tattoo all play a key role in the ways in which that tattoo will be interpreted on the female tattooed body – mainly as either appropriate or inappropriate – the understanding of what constitutes ‘appropriate’ tattoo *imagery* is a complex one that bears more consideration. Another important consideration in the kinds of attributions that are made about the tattooed female body is the presumed ‘meaning’ that is associated with any tattoo selection. From the perspective of the interviewees, and whether on males or females, there is an implicit understanding that mainstream tattoos<sup>4</sup> should be not be obtained for frivolous reasons, or simply to ‘follow the crowd’. Mainstream tattoos are viewed as legitimate only if they are perceived as ‘meaningful’ for those who bear them, and yet the concept of tattoo legitimacy and tattoo ‘meaning’ has many far-reaching contradictions that are important considerations in relation to female tattooing.

Through the course of the interviews, the participants consistently referred to the importance of tattoo ‘meaning’ – a dialogue on tattoo selection wherein the tattoo is situated as a front cover for the story that lies within, or rather before, the

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction between spectacular tattooed bodies and mainstream tattooed bodies is evident not only in the ways in which spectacular bodies are tattooed, but also in the ways in which their bodies are critiqued by others. Of the tattooees within my interview sample, four males were the bearers of tattoo art that is consistent with the spectacular tattooing more traditionally discussed in academic literature – comprised of large, multiple, and highly visible tattoos. Interestingly, there were *no* female tattooees in my interview sample who had tattooing that was synonymous with the spectacular body. Also of interest were the different ways in which the spectacular tattooees and the mainstream tattooees reported feeling critiqued. While the four spectacular tattooees all discussed being made to feel like an “outsider” because of their tattoos (*Evan age 27, Mike age 26, Doug age 22, Joseph age 28*), this issue was rarely discussed by the mainstream tattooees who generally had much less visible tattooing. Instead, the mainstream tattooed interviewees often referred to tattoo ‘meaning’ as the basis upon which their bodies are critiqued, while three of the four *spectacular* tattooees indicated that their tattoos have “no meaning” at all (*Mike age 26, Doug age 22, Joseph age 28*). This suggests that spectacular tattooed bodies are not critiqued in the same way on the basis of tattoo ‘meaning’, and that the issue of tattoo ‘meaning’ is one that is specific to the mainstream tattooed body. This is an interesting association, for if the concept of the ‘meaningful’ or ‘meaningless’ tattoo is only applicable to mainstream bodies, and if women are less likely to be involved in spectacular renditions of tattooing (Atkinson 2002, Atkinson 2003), then tattoo ‘meaning’ can be understood to be a key way in which the mainstream *female* tattooed body is interpreted by others.



selection of the tattoo. For example, in discussing the difference between appropriate and inappropriate mainstream tattoos, one participant said:

[Y]ou know what I really think? I think tattoos with meaning [are appropriate]. If a person can say there's meaning behind it, it's like 'oh, okay'. Look at *Miami Ink*.<sup>5</sup> It's pretty much a show based on people going in there and saying they have this huge story behind their tattoo. They get the tattoo and society watches it. (*Doug, age 22*).

Having a story to tell about one's tattoo and being able to link one's tattoo to one's personal identity was an important expectation for the majority of the participants. Another (non-tattooed) participant clarified the extent to which a tattoo is judged, and then ultimately valued or devalued, based on the perceived presence or absence of 'meaning':

[W]hen I talk to people about it, they said if you're flipping through a book of tattoos *that's not good*. So there is that attitude. If he just got it out of a book, whatever. It's just there because tattoos look cool and you want a tattoo... but to be honest, when I've thought of getting a tattoo, part of it has been because it's cool! I've seen people react to other people when they've had tattoos. And you know it's just sort of 'oh that's cool, why'd you get it?' It's a way to introduce yourself to people. But admitting that, admitting that you got it because you want to show it to people, you can't do it. *You have to say you got it for a reason*. (my emphasis, *Dan, age 28*).

Tattoo story-telling, or providing a 'meaning' or reason behind the acquisition of the tattoo, serves to legitimate a tattoo selection. As one of the spectacular tattooees suggested in his analysis of the mainstream tattooing of others, "people think to judge having a tattoo, it has to have some kind of meaning and that's the only thing that will justify having a tattoo" (*Joseph, age 28*).

Behind these expectations about the right kinds of motivations for getting tattoos are notions of individualism and conformity. It is implicitly understood that individualists seek out meaningful tattoos – tattoos that are understood to tell others something about them – while conformists are perceived to acquire tattoos simply because others have them. Participants argued that "so many different kinds of people have tattoos now, it's not just the rebellious people or not just the artsy people, *anyone* can have one now" (my emphasis, *Greg, age 23*), and "It's just very trendy at the moment" (*Beth, age 21*). In relation to the trendiness associated with tattooing, the interviewees indicated that there are a variety of

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<sup>5</sup> *Miami Ink*: <http://tlc.discovery.com/fansites/miami-ink/miami-ink.html>

*Miami Ink* is a reality television show that premiered in July of 2005 on the TLC network. The show is set in a tattoo shop in Florida, and features the lives of the tattoo artists in relation to their work. It also televises the tattoo selections of many of their clients, often sharing the personal stories behind the tattoos that each client has selected or commissioned a design for.

tattoos that are considered to be “absolutely meaningless” (*Meg age 21, Doug age 22, Ryan age 23*) on the basis that the tattoo is considered to be too “overdone” (*Doug age 22, Anne age 25*) and is thus not viewed as an individualistic, original, or ‘meaningful’ tattoo.

The general consensus amongst the interviewees was that the list of tattoos that are broadly considered to be ‘meaningless’ includes tattoos that are not personally designed, but instead are selected from a tattoo book or the wall display in a tattoo parlor (referred to within the tattoo community as ‘flash’ tattoos) such as images of cartoon characters, Chinese or Kanji Japanese writing tattoos, a male bicep/band tattoo, and many other standardized images. However the list of ‘meaningless’ tattoos also includes many tattoos that are specifically understood to be ‘feminine’ tattoos, such as a single butterfly or basic flower tattoo on a female (generally also a flash tattoo) as well as the very popular lower back tattoos on women.<sup>6</sup> Each of the tattoos on the above list fit the criteria for the ‘meaningless’ tattoo amongst interview participants in that they were considered to be “too overdone” (*Doug age 22*) or “unimaginative” (*Anne, age 25*), and were often referred to in the context of tattoos that were considered to be the least desirable (either for one’s own personal tattoo selection, or having been viewed upon the body of another).

Importantly, participants also often discussed the conformity associated with mainstream ‘meaningless’ tattoos as not only undesirable, or “not good” (*Dan, age 28*), but also in clearly *disparaging* terms. One participant said: “if you’re going to do that for yourself, there should be something behind it. I dunno. Otherwise just buy a nice painting and stick it on your wall, if you’re going to spend that money” (*Beth, age 21*). Another interview participant put it this way:

I don’t like any Asian symbols [as tattoos]. I think it’s sooooo cheesy. I just do. Because people are just like, oh it means unity, and I’m like no it doesn’t, it means combo number five or something, *you got duped*. (my emphasis, *Ryan, age 23*).

A third interviewee discussed what he viewed as the *arbitrary* selection of ‘meaningless’ tattoos, once again singled out as the Japanese kanji or Chinese lettering, by stating:

I kinda look at them like, I would assume if they weren’t Asian and they didn’t look like they were into, *if it looked like it didn’t have meaning, then I would assume they did it for pop culture reasons*. I probably wouldn’t respect them as much. I’d think you kinda jumped on the bandwagon. (my emphasis, *Greg, age 23*).

Thus tattoos that were viewed as arbitrarily selected, or that weren’t considered to be ‘valid’ tattoo selections based upon the life history of the tattooee, were broadly devalued as too “pop culture” (*Greg, age 23*), too “cliché” (*Anne, age*

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<sup>6</sup> The relationship between ‘meaninglessness’ and the lower back tattoo will be teased out more carefully in chapter three.

25), or “passé” (*Meg, age 21*), and thus not worthy of one’s respect (*Greg, age 23*). As one participant’s suggestion demonstrates, when tattoos are viewed as too conformist the tattoo becomes interpreted in a way that delegitimizes the tattoo through an allusion to in-authenticity: “I don’t think that their motives are authentic for getting a tattoo” (*Ashley, age 21*).

Within this dialogue on tattoo meaning, tattoos that were viewed as ‘meaningless’ played a primary role as a regulator of tattooed bodies - no tattooee wants to have their tattoo labeled as ‘meaningless’ due to the loss of respect associated with such a selection. Thus in *opposition* to the devalued ‘meaningless’ or arbitrarily selected tattoo is that which is generally strived for amongst mainstream tattooees - the valued, meaningful tattoo. ‘Authentic’ tattoos by comparison were viewed as reflective in some way of the life history of the tattooee, and were thus valued as “acceptable” tattoos:

If a friend of mine had died and I got a commemorative tattoo, or something life changing happened to me and I got a tattoo because of it, that would be more acceptable than something not acceptable. If I just got a dolphin on my ankle because I like swimming, that would not be enough. *That would not be a good enough reason to get a tattoo.* (my emphasis, *Anne, age 25*).

Tattoo selection, and the interpretation of tattoo ‘meaning’, thus clearly impacts how a tattooee will be viewed by others within their peer group, for not only will the tattoo be critiqued on the basis of whether it is perceived to have a meaning, as Anne indicated above, but the *tattooed person* will also be critiqued on the basis of this lack of meaning: “I’d much more respect someone who put a lot of thought into what their tattoo was. That it has that meaning in it” (*Beth, age 21*). Thus in terms of *mainstream* tattooing, the body that can display a ‘meaningful’ tattoo will be respected and valued, while the body that displays what is presumed (or socially/culturally decided) to be a ‘meaningless’ tattoo will become an object of derision. The acquisition of a tattoo that has been identified as a “meaningless” tattoo can risk being interpreted by others as having a “cheesy” tattoo (*Ryan, age 23*), an interpretation that could, as indicated above, result in a loss of respect for the person who bears the tattoo (*Greg age 23, Beth age 21*).

The importance of having a ‘meaningful’ tattoo was reflected in the effort that most participants put into explaining their tattoos during the interviews. Each interview became not only the story of the tattoo itself, but the story of *who they were* as a person. Each interview was almost like a peek into the life of the tattooee, and it was clear through the course of their story telling that tattooees were very *passionate* about, and even emotionally connected to, their tattoos. The tattoo stories shared in the interviews consistently related to personal accomplishments, life goals or milestones reached, family and friends who had passed away, tattoos signifying group membership (including physical membership as within a sport or club, or symbolic membership in terms of affiliation with a particular educational discipline, school of thought, or personal philosophy), and tattoos that signified other personal characteristics felt to be

representative of the individual.<sup>7</sup> The significance of these stories was captured well by one participant who said: “it represents part of my identity” (*Aimee, age 23*). Others described their tattoos in similar ways, stating, “I feel that they are very very personal tattoos” (*Jan, age 23*), and “I wanted something with a little bit of story!” (*Ryan, age 23*). One participant emphatically stated, “I wouldn’t get something random, flowers and butterflies. Like some of these girls do. I’m getting something that means something to me” (*Danena, age 19*).

Those with tattoos that might potentially be interpreted as ‘meaningless’ had a variety of strategies for dealing with the potential disapproval of their tattoo. Katie describes the response of others to her small Kanjii tattoo: “My army coworkers are mostly of the opinion that it’s lame... they were like oh, did you get that out of a book?” (*Katie, age 22*). Katie countered this assault on the legitimacy of her tattoo by stating that while her tattoo was selected from flash (one of the main criteria for a ‘meaningless’ tattoo), it is “not really a meaningless tattoo... it’s meaningless in what it is, but it was more the experience that was meaningful to me” (*Katie, age 22*). Moreover, at the time of the interview Katie was considering acquiring another more “meaningful”, tattoo, because “the thing about myself right now [is that] I don’t want to feel like a poser” (*Kate, age 22*). It is evident that the dialogue on tattoo ‘meaning’ is a powerful regulator of tattooed bodies, for while the majority of the mainstream tattooees discussed their tattoos within this framework of ‘meaning’, those tattooees who had tattoos that did not on the surface appear to be ‘meaningful’ to others thus strove to create a meaning for their tattoos through story telling as a means of mitigating the judgment of their peers - and these same tattooees also indicated that they would more seriously consider tattoo ‘meaning’ in the selection of any new tattoos they may acquire. As another participant similarly stated, in discussing her ‘meaningless’ tattoo, “I think that’s where [why] I feel I need a new one” (*Tracy, age 25*).

Other participants indicated that they sometimes manufacture a meaning for their tattoo *after* acquiring said tattoo. In the following quote, Ashley explains that she acquired her tattoo simply out of desire for a tattoo, but afterwards thought of a meaning behind the tattoo as a way of countering people’s questions about her body art:

[E]veryone was just asking me, oh why did you get it. Sometimes answering I just wanted one is apparently not enough of an answer to some people. Because it is something you are going to deal with forever. So people want more, when explaining it, people want more of a story behind it. (*Ashley, age 21*).

Several participants referenced this phenomenon, suggesting that the meaning of their tattoo “came together after the fact” (*Andrew, age 21*) in response to the

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<sup>7</sup> Please refer to Appendix H for examples of the stories that the interviewees shared about the meaning of their tattoos.

questions of others. This reflects the extent to which mainstream tattooees feel pressured to conform to the ‘meaning’ dialogue, as a way of deflecting the potential criticism that may be aimed at a tattoo that does not have a good story behind it, or is not comprised of an original design – criticism that may take the form of categorizing the tattoo as “meaningless” (*Katie, age 22*), or “stupid” (*Ryan, age 23*).

One thing that became clear within this dialogue on tattoo ‘meaning’ is that not only does a tattoo need to reflect some sort of deeper meaning that will be evident to the outsider who sees the tattoo, but also some meanings are considered to be more legitimate than others. Thus one’s tattoo does not have meaning unless those who view the tattoo decide that it is ‘valid’ or ‘meaningful’. As one non-tattooed interviewee suggested, a tattoo can sometimes meet this criteria for approval based upon the ‘validity’ of the story behind it:

[A]s long as it’s [the tattoo story represents] a good achievement. I just think major lifetime goals, if you meet a life goal that’s totally something you can flaunt, that’s awesome... people who go to the Olympics and get that tattooed on their shoulder, I think that’s awesome. That’s an achievement. You can totally flaunt that for sure. (*Amanda, age 23*).

Another non-tattooed participant asserted:

“In my opinion the best reason I’ve seen for getting a tattoo is if someone makes it through something either mental or physical that they didn’t think they’d make it through, then they get it [the tattoo] as a reminder” (*Mick, age 20*).

It is important to understand that these ‘legitimate’ reasons for a tattoo offer some contradiction in terms of practice, however, for unless one approaches a tattooee and specifically asks them to share their tattoo story, the ‘meaning’ or ‘meaninglessness’ of the tattoo is often decided without consideration of the potential personal meaning that the tattoo may hold for the tattooee, as is clearly the case in relation to the *broad categorization* of particular types of tattoos within the realm of ‘meaningless’ tattoos (flash tattoos, Kanjii tattoos, butterflies and flowers, bicep bands, crosses, lower back tattoos). This is clearly the case with Katie’s tattoo for example – a tattoo that is both a flash tattoo and a Kanji tattoo – and is thus categorized by her coworkers as “lame” and “meaningless” despite the fact that the tattoo holds a personal meaning for her (*Katie, age 22*). This is also the case for Jess’s Kanjii tattoo and her lower back tattoo, both tattoos that she related to her grandfather’s substantial influence in her life (*Jess, age 21*), but are tattoos that also fit into the categories clearly identified as ‘meaningless’ by the interviewees. Interestingly, many of the tattoos acquired by the interviewees that would be considered to be ‘meaningless’ tattoos often heralded personal significance for the tattooee, and despite their broad categorization as ‘meaningless’ tattoos, they were often no different in terms of personal significance from the tattoos that were viewed to be ‘meaningful’.

In a very real sense then, it is clear that it is not the bearer of the tattoo who chooses a tattoo meaning, or decides if the tattoo is meaningful or meaningless in the context of their own lived history, but rather it is the outside viewer of the tattoo who has this power. The tattooee is operating within a realm where “People do not want you to have a tattoo for frivolous reasons. I think they want tattoos to be meaningful. Even if it’s not their own. You have to have a story behind it” (*Anne, age 25*). The permanency of tattooing is consistently cited as the fulcrum upon which tattoo ‘meaning’ should be actively negotiated by the tattooee, for “everybody says you know it’s there for life and it *should* mean something” (my emphasis, *Joseph, age 28*). Within this framework, it is clear that tattoo ‘meaning’ becomes not only a means of legitimating one’s tattoo selection over other possible selections, but on a deeper level tattoo ‘meaning’ itself becomes a socially constructed method whereby others have the power to categorize a tattoo as either a “cool” tattoo (*Danena, age 19*) or one that is “stupid” (*Ryan age 23, Jess age 21*) and “lame” (*Katie, age 22*). The loss of respect and potential stigma associated with having a ‘meaningless’ tattoo suggests that this devaluing has a tangible impact on the lives of tattooees, and the extent to which tattooees will go to in order to frame their tattoos as meaningful clearly situates this ‘meaning’ discourse as fundamental to the understanding of the mainstream tattooed body – and thus the female tattooed body as well.

I would argue that the dialogue on tattoo ‘meaning’ thus reveals itself to be not only a legitimization discourse for tattooees - sharing one’s tattoo ‘meaning’ as a means of managing the stigma of having become tattooed (Irwin 2008) - but is more importantly a *de-legitimation* discourse for those who interpret the tattooed body. While it can be argued that historically almost *all* tattooed bodies were devalued through their subject to broad social sanctions (Sanders 1989, DeMello 1993, DeMello 1995, DeMello 2000, Fisher 2002, Halnon 2006), the same can not be said of the social milieu within which tattooing is currently practiced. Currently, only *certain* mainstream tattooed bodies are devalued through their categorization as a ‘meaningless’ tattoo, while others are more generally celebrated as individualistic. In relation to the female tattooed body more specifically, it is extremely interesting that many of the tattoos that the interviewees referred to in the previous section on ‘feminine’ (and thus appropriate) tattoos are *the same tattoos* that risk being pegged as a ‘meaningless’ tattoo, even when that tattoo might have personal significance for the tattooee. For women specifically, this includes the acquisition of feminine tattoo imagery that is broadly associated with flash tattooing, such as a butterfly or a flower, and also includes the lower back tattoo on women. And because female tattooees tend to practice more mainstream renditions of tattooing (Atkinson 2002, Atkinson 2003), I would suggest that tattoo ‘meaninglessness’ serves as a key way in which the majority of female tattooed bodies come to be viewed either positively or negatively by others.

## Summary

In this chapter I have discussed interpretations of the female tattooed body in relation to the implicit understandings of tattooing ‘rules’ as they apply to women, or what tattooing is broadly considered to be appropriate or inappropriate on the female body. In summarizing the findings of this chapter, it is clear that female tattooing can be broadly sorted into two main categories in relation to how they are both experienced and interpreted by others: i) tattoos that are considered to be ‘appropriate’ tattoos on the female body, wherein women have *negotiated* with the expectations of femininity in acquiring tattoos that are perceived to cause the least risk to their social status, and ii) tattoos that are considered to be ‘inappropriate’ on the female body, wherein women have *resisted* the expectations associated with the acquisition of ‘feminine’ tattoos.

Within these categories, the tattoos that are deemed to be *appropriate* tattoos for women (otherwise understood to be negotiated along the lines of gender) include: i) tattoos that are comprised of more ‘feminine’ docile imagery; ii) tattoos that are relatively small; iii) tattoos that are located on the hip, the small of the back, the back of the shoulder, or the ankles; and iv) tattoos that are either concealed, or easily concealable. Alternatively, tattoos that are deemed to be *inappropriate* or resistant on the female body include: i) tattoos that are comprised of more ‘masculine’ or aggressive imagery; ii) tattoos that are larger; iii) tattoos that are located on the bicep, the forearms, the upper shoulder, the abs, or across the expanse of the upper back; and iv) tattoos that are more visible, or more difficult to conceal.

Further, it is clear that while female tattoos are considered appropriate or inappropriate on the basis of these implicit ‘rules’, there is a further rule regarding tattoo ‘meaning’ with which the above rules must engage if a female tattooee wishes to maintain the respect of her peers. Thus, while a woman is expected to acquire a tattoo that is more characteristically feminine in imagery as a means of mitigating the masculinity that is commonly associated with many tattoo projects, to select a ‘feminine’ tattoo (especially if the tattoo she selects is associated with flash tattooing, such as a butterfly or a flower, or is in a commonly selected location such as the lower back) risks being interpreted as “unimaginative” (*Anne, age 25*), “stupid” (*Ryan, age 23*), and thus “meaningless” (*Meg, age 21*). This risk is still perceptible regardless of whether or not these particular tattoos have a personal meaning for the tattooee, highlighting the contradictions associated with this tattooing rule. For many women this creates a tightrope walk in choosing a tattoo, for not only will the tattoo be judged on the basis of the perceived gender-appropriateness of the tattoo, but it will also be critiqued in terms of the potential for tattoo ‘meaninglessness’ – an implicit rule regulating mainstream tattooed bodies that serves to further limit the ‘appropriate’ tattoos that a woman may conceivably acquire.

In interpreting these findings, a few key associations stand out. One thing that becomes immediately clear is the extent to which tattooing is interpreted

differently on the male and the female body. The tattoos that are listed above as ‘inappropriate’ or resistant tattoos on the body of a woman are the same tattoos that are more traditionally associated with masculinity, and are thus generally considered to be appropriate for men. Interestingly, these same masculine themed tattoos are, as indicated in the first section of the chapter, also often associated with the concepts of physical power (violence) and psychological power (intimidation). Thus when a woman acquires such a tattoo, this act is interpreted as a challenge to dominant gender codes, and becomes the means by which her body becomes interpreted as resistant.

The tattoos that are understood to be resistant on female bodies are the same tattoos that are understood to be ‘inappropriate’ tattoos for women, and are thus likely to elicit *disapproval* from others. This can be linked back with our discussion in the literature on male and female body ideals – while men are expected to perform an ideal ‘masculinity’ that is viewed as stronger and more aggressive, women are expected to perform an ideal ‘femininity’ that characterizes them as physically smaller and thus less of a physical threat (Faludi 1991, Findlay 1996, Wolf 2002). Thus the ‘femininity’ that women are expected to perform through the selection of feminine tattoos indicates the extent to which women are expected to symbolically represent themselves as less powerful. When they do represent themselves as more powerful through the acquisition of masculine themed tattooing they risk social disapproval and social retribution.

The idea that masculine and feminine tattoo selections can be related to symbolic power is based not only on the selection of feminine tattoos (through imagery, size, and location), however, for visibility also plays a key role in the extent to which tattoos become interpreted as resistant tattoos, or as laying a claim to power. If a woman who acquires a masculine tattoo is interpreted as laying a claim to power, and women are broadly expected to conceal their tattoos more so than are men, then this tells us that women are expected to portray themselves as less powerful than men through their tattoo selections. As Pitts suggests, through the concealment of one’s tattoo, the communicative power of that tattoo is muted, and to some degree effectively silenced (Pitts, 2003), and as such the impetus for concealment within female tattooing suggests a silencing of the resistant potential of female tattoo projects.

The disapproval of powerful feminine tattooing can be understood within this context. As one participant succinctly stated, selecting a tattoo becomes a part of one’s “impression management” (*Derrick, age 32*), and it is clear that the impressions that male and female tattooees are expected to present differ markedly based on what tattoos are considered to be appropriate for each body. The concept of impression management is one that clearly applies to both men and women in relation to their tattoo selections, but I would argue that it *does not* apply to men and women *equally*, in that the impressions that each are trying to negotiate differ markedly in relation to the symbolic communication of power. The necessity for women to mitigate social disapproval through ‘feminine’ themed imagery and tattoo concealment, and the related understanding that



powerful tattooing is that which is 'masculine', both support the argument that it is the symbolic communication of dissent, or the symbolic claim to power, that is at stake, not the act of tattooing itself. The importance of tattooing in relation to power will be returned to again in the following chapters of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Sexual Interpretations of the Female Tattooed Body**

The previous chapter looked at many of the broad overall themes relating to how the female tattooed body comes to be interpreted as either appropriate or inappropriate, negotiated or resistant – including a discussion of the implicit understandings in relation to ‘feminine’ tattooing, the dialogue on tattoo visibility regarding both concealment and communicative power, and the importance of mainstream tattoo ‘meaning’ as a means of interpreting female tattooing. Chapter Two will focus more closely on how tattooing on the female body comes to be interpreted within the context of sexuality, and how the sexual interpretations of the female tattooed body relate to gender negotiation and resistance. The chapter is divided into discussions of the following themes: i) the concepts of ‘butch’ tattooing, ‘sexy’ tattooing, and ‘slutty’ tattooing; ii) the development of the label *tramp stamp* for the female lower back tattoo, and how this label relates to the above categories; and iii) the dialogue on sexual agency versus practicality, or the reasons given for why women choose to acquire the *tramp stamp*.

#### **Sexual Categorization of Female Tattooing**

The association between the female tattooed body and sexuality has been discussed briefly in the literature on the historical development of tattooing in North America, generally in relation to the heavily tattooed female bodies that are associated with the carnival era. As indicated, however, this historical association between female tattooing and sexuality has filtered down into current attitudes

towards tattooing, as evident in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century association between female tattooing and sexual possession (Steward 1990), as well as in depictions of female tattooing in modern media venues (DeMello 1995, Turner 1999). The extent to which female sexuality is broadly associated with tattooing is a topic that was consistently raised by the interview participants, who often read various forms of female tattooing as a signifier for sexual orientations and/or sexual approachability. Throughout the course of the interviews it became evident that in terms of a collective symbolic understanding of women's tattoos, there is a common sense understanding that there are different *kinds* of tattooed female bodies in relation to sexuality, and depending upon the imagery, location, size, visibility, and presumed 'meaning' of a woman's tattoos, her body could easily be shifted into any of these sexual categories. The following section will discuss each of the tattoo categories that were discussed by the interviewees in relation to sexuality, including a discussion of the 'butch' tattooed body, the 'sexy' tattooed body, and the 'slutty' tattooed body.

One of the sexual interpretations that was consistently discussed by the interviewees was that of 'butch' tattooing, a label that was generally applied by participants to tattoos on the female body that did not appear to be categorizable as typical 'feminine' tattoos. One participant suggested:

I think, ahhh jeeze how can you put it without being politically incorrect, but certainly lesbians, you know, more butch type lesbians would have more masculine tattoos done than a feminine woman. (*Al, age 50*).

Al defines butch tattoos as generally more masculine in display, and similarly indicates that by comparison, 'feminine' tattoos can be associated with heterosexuality. Other participants agreed that a female tattooee could be read as 'butch' on the basis of tattoo *imagery* that is understood to be more typically masculine, "You're butch, you've got a panther. You're butch, you've got... I don't know what else, flames" (*Dana, age 19*). However, the number and visibility of a woman's tattoos could also invite the 'butch' label: "If you see a woman with lots of tattoos and she's dressed in a butch style, people might assume that she's a lesbian" (*Lindsay, age 21*). So too could the tattoo location and size:

When you see a girl with more of an arm tattoo, you think oh that's a little bit butch, or that's a little bit... you expect something more along the lines... yeah larger tattoos I don't think are perceived as being as feminine. (*Andrew, age 21*).

Participants' definitions of what constitutes 'butch' tattooing is consistent with the definition of 'masculine' tattoo imagery that was discussed in Chapter One - large and visible tattoos that make use of 'masculine' imagery or imagery seen as inappropriate on the female body.

'Butch' tattoos also tended to be connected to notions of power. When asked for his thoughts on heavy tattooing on the female body, Andrew said, "those masculine tattoos, it would be like it's kind of butch, kind of tough"

(*Andrew, age 21*), suggesting a conflation between the concepts of butch and tough similar to the commonly referenced association between masculine tattooing and toughness. Aimee (*age 23*), who self identified as a lesbian, discussed her ‘masculine’ bicep tattoo as providing her with a sense of empowerment that not only draws on the presumed masculinity that is commonly associated with the acquisition of a *visible* bicep tattoo, but also draws on the concept of the ‘butch’ body:

*Aimee:* some days when I need to make a really dykey statement I’ll make sure that I dress really butch-y, with short sleeves and... <laughs>

*Researcher:* So when do you feel like you want to make that statement? On what occasions?

*Aimee:* When I was back home in December, I had to go on to the military base to pick my dad up. And so, dyked out, as much as I possibly could.

*Researcher:* And so was that playing with your dad’s comfort level?

*Aimee:* Yep, and all the rest of the military men that he works with... If I have to come on to a *military* base, there’s no way I’m going to look weak! <laughs>

The connection that Aimee makes between a powerful display of self and the visibility of her tattoo through the selection of short sleeves is interesting. As discussed in Chapter One, the bicep tattoo is typically understood by young adults to be a masculine tattoo that is meant to emphasize the musculature of the male arm. This tattoo style was referenced by the interviewees as having the potential, on a female body, to challenge social scripts for femininity. Aimee clarifies that it is not only the masculinity of the tattoo, however, but also the way in which the military men read her body as a ‘butch’ body that provides her with a sense of empowerment - a “dykey statement” that enables her to avoid presenting herself as “weak” when in their presence (*Aimee, age 23*).

However, tattoos that were described as ‘butch’ did not always invite assumptions about the homosexuality of the women who bore them. This became evident in the ways in which ‘butch’ tattooing was discussed by participants in relation to heterosexual female bodies. One participant, when asked about how ‘masculine’ tattoo imagery might be interpreted on a female body, indicated that many people would “probably just feel [that it is] too masculine. I can see that somebody would probably *say* that she’s all butch and whatever. *Even if she wasn’t*. Even if she just really liked skulls” (my emphasis, *Jan, age 23*).

Similarly, Ashley explained that ‘butch’ tattoos could be linked with *heterosexuality*, and do not necessarily mean that their bearers are lesbians:

I think it also goes back to generalization and sexuality as well, where if you see a woman who looks aggressive and has a lot of tattoos you automatically assume that she’s butch. And butch doesn’t necessarily mean lesbian, but some people lump it in with that. Rather than say the woman is in touch with her masculine side, and has a balance between both sexualities. It’s not seen as that, it’s seen as butch. (*Ashley, age 21*).

Another participant likewise claimed, “With the butch [tattoos] I feel like it’s possible to be butch and be hetero. But also I mean of course there’s the association that she’s butch, [so] she *might* be a lesbian” (my emphasis, *Andrew age 21*). The participants thus indicated that when a female tattooee is labeled as ‘butch’, this does not necessarily mean that she is actually understood to be a lesbian. Rather, the label ‘butch’ is also understood as a label that serves to question the selection of ‘masculine’ tattooing on a heterosexual female body. This is an interesting distinction, because it suggests that the label ‘butch’ can be applied to a knowingly heterosexual body as a way of implying that a woman is masculine-like, or lesbian-like, on the basis of her tattoo(s), and regardless of her heterosexuality.

The interviewees indicated that when the ‘butch’ label is applied to heterosexual women, it often serves as a critique, or as a way of challenging tattoo selections that are perceived to be unfeminine or inappropriate. Katie, who self-identified as heterosexual, suggested that to have your tattoo referred to as ‘butch’, or to be referred to as ‘butch’ in general, can be understood and experienced as a *negative* label:

I think the thing that bothers me the most when it comes to gender differences is that in order to be a strong woman it’s almost impossible without them labeling you as a lesbian. It pisses me off to no end. If I get into a fight with a guy and I start actually physically punching him or doing something, it’s like ‘whoa whoa whoa’. Or say I go to a strip club. I’ve gone to strip clubs, they’re very boring. But everyone else is going, ‘where do you think I’m gonna go? I’m going with you!’ And they’re like ‘why are you coming with us, are you gay?’ It’s like ‘are you fucking kidding me? It’s because you’re going. Where do you want me to go?’ And it’s the same with tattoos. If I get some frickin huge tattoo here they’re more likely to be ‘what’s your problem, are you gay?’ And I’m like ‘I really don’t like dealing with this question over and over. I don’t feel like discussing my sexuality with you all the time.’ (*Katie, age 22*).

Here Katie draws a comparison between the powerful and resistant tattooing that she admires and the social devaluing that is associated with being labeled as a

lesbian within her peer group. Her frustration with not being able to display gender resistance and power without being labeled as a lesbian is evident, and is indicative of how being considered ‘butch’ on the basis of one’s tattoo, while empowering for some, can also be experienced as a negative critique by many heterosexual young women. Katie’s tattoo was a small, concealable tattoo located along her hipbone (one of the locations discussed in Chapter One as ‘appropriate’ female tattooing). When discussing the selection of her tattoo she suggested:

If you get a more *out there* tattoo, people are more likely to think you’re gay. If you’re a girl. A bicep type tattoo? They’re probably going to be look at you more like ‘are you gay?’  
Totally. (*Katie, age 22*).

If Katie would rather avoid having her sexual orientation questioned on the basis of her tattoo selection, others are trying to avoid being seen as unfeminine and unattractive:

[T]he women with that tattoo I’ll be honest, it makes me think that they’re much more butch, when they have that tattoo on their arm. I don’t think a nice woman would get one around her arm like that. It has a masculine implication. (*Dan, age 28*).

While ‘butch’ tattoos may be associated with masculinity, then, they may also be associated with a woman not being “nice” in terms of perceived femininity and heterosexual attractiveness (*Dan, age 28*).

Throughout the interviews there was a conflation between the concept of a body that appears to be lesbian, and a body where “something’s not quite right” in relation to the presumed heterosexuality of young women. The interviews suggested that a heavily tattooed female body could be socially understood as not only “butch” (*Aimee, age 23*) or indicative of the fact that the woman might be “a dyke” (*Meg, age 21*), but could also be seen as indicating that the woman is “too masculine” (*Jan, age 23*) or “not necessarily ladylike... oh she must be like you know a lesbian or things like that” (*Ashley, age 21*). While the participants did not make comments that referenced homophobia specifically, what they did do was acknowledge in their statements that there is a level of negative critique that accompanies the association of their tattooing with lesbianism. To have a tattooed body synonymous with the display of lesbianism may in some circumstances create a substantial social risk for heterosexual women in terms of their social standing within their peer groups. This is evident in the comment that masculine tattooing on the female body indicates that a woman may be “crazy” (*Angie age 28, Doug age 22*), or that “something’s not quite right” (*Angie age 28*). It is evident as well in the suggestion that such styles of tattooing are not desirable for a young heterosexual woman because of this negatively perceived association with lesbianism: “If society didn’t think that I’d have the tribals on my arm” (*Angie, age 28*).

The second categorization relating to sexuality that was often discussed by the interviewees was that of ‘sexy’ tattooing, or tattooing that is broadly associated with (a specifically heterosexual) sexual suggestiveness when viewed

on the female body. While the interview participants could almost never think of heavily tattooed female characters in fictional movies or television shows (discussed in Chapter One), they *did* often reference highly sexualized female media figures who have ‘sexy’ tattoos, including but not limited to the much publicized tattooing of Angelina Jolie, Britney Spears, Pamela Anderson, and Kat Von D from *Miami Ink*.<sup>1</sup> As one participant suggested, “Pamela Anderson... she shows her tattoo in *Barbed Wire*, it was a movie... I’m pretty sure she was a little sex kitten in it” (*Jess, age 21*). Such references were a consistent part of the interviews and reflect the extent to which female tattooed bodies were interpreted by the interviewees through the framework of ‘sexy’ tattooing.

‘Sexy’ tattooing was also discussed in relation to participants’ own interactions as a key way in which many young women’s tattoos are currently interpreted. Jenna explained the typical heterosexual female tattooing in relation to the kind of tattooing that is viewed as more typical of men, suggesting that: “Women generally get tattoos that are more sort of sexy, and guys get tattoos that are more sort of tough” (*Jenna, age 27*). Both male and female participants recognized the possibility for female tattooing to be viewed as highly sexual, and male participants often commented that tattoos in particular locations on the female body are ‘sexy’ tattoos: “I know that I feel it and I know other guys say the same thing about tattoos on girls, that they’re sexy. I don’t know why” (*Dan, age 28*).

When asked to describe what tattoos were considered to be ‘sexy’, participants almost always referred to the location, “it’s the location, the lower back and down on the hip” (*Dan, age 28*). Another participant clarified that the acquisition of a tattoo in one of these ‘sexy’ locations, especially when the tattoo is made visible, can be interpreted as intentionally drawing attention to sexualized areas of the female body:

It depends also on the way you would be displaying them. But I think that if you got the upper or lower breast tattoo, I think that’s something that’s meant to draw attention to the breast. Like hip ones, the lower back, yeah they’re all like, the location draws your eye there. I think you probably have to say generally it’s used as erotic in some ways. (*Andrew, age 21*).

The same locations that were cited by the interview participants as ‘sexy’ tattoo locations - the hip bone or torso area, the lower back area, and occasionally the ankles and breasts – are several of the same tattoo locations that were discussed as appropriate tattoo locations for women in Chapter One, and with the exception of the breasts, are also areas where women generally acquire their tattoos (Appendix M table 1).

In discussing the tattoo on her hipbone, Jenna explains, “I think where mine is, that’s a pretty sexual area. I think that sort of connotes, I dunno, that the person is sexually active I guess? Or that they’re not a prude” (*Jenna, age 27*).

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<sup>1</sup> *Miami Ink*, a reality show on TLC that premiered in July 2005.

Several participants confirmed this statement regarding moderate forms of female tattooing, suggesting that especially when acquired in sexually explicit areas, tattoos are often socially viewed as a signifier for the sexual experience of the female tattooee. Derrick discussed female tattooing within this framework of sexual experience:

If you see some girl with all these tattoos and stuff, again you're intrigued. Like 'oh yeah'... you just think oh man, she must have some stories. And if you're a younger guy, you're like, 'learn me now', you know what I mean? 'Learn me!'  
<laughs>. (*Derrick, age 32*).

It is clear that for many young adults, tattooing on the female body can be interpreted as indicative of a woman's sexual experience. Depending on how women are "displaying them", it may be viewed as something that is intentionally "erotic" in terms of the sexual agency of the tattooee (*Andrew, age 21*).

Many of the tattooed female interview participants actually experienced responses to their tattoos that reflected the associations made to sexuality:

They look. They look away and then they look back again. You're just walking at the bars, I don't do it anymore, but when I was younger you would walk through with a shirt that's nice and low. And the boys and their free drinks because of that especially, because I found before [I got the breast tattoo] that the guys were average, but after the guys were like oh my god I've got to go talk to the girl with the tattoo, right there. (*Angie, age 28*).

Another young woman described how she prominently displayed her tattoos through the careful selection of clothing as a means of eliciting such responses:

Two weeks ago I was in this bar... and as soon as I walked in this group of three guys were like oh I love your tattoo and they called me over, and this one guy bought me sixty bucks worth of drinks. So I guess [showing] it kind of works. (*Danena, age 19*).

A third participant indicated that she intentionally chose her tattoo location as a means of emphasizing her legs in a sexual manner:

Just you know when you're wearing high heels you're accenting your calf. Guys look at legs, it's something sexual. And you know like I say, I wear dresses a lot, and that's part of why I chose the location. (*Meg, age 21*).

This active engagement in the 'sexy' tattoo discourse as a means of attracting male attention was referenced repeatedly throughout the interviews. Many young women experience their tattoo locations as 'sexy', and also experience the attention that these tattoos generate from the opposite sex as socially and emotionally empowering: "My boyfriend said... with the tattoos you're kind of like a badass girl, it's really hot.... That's how guys look at it" (*Jess, age 21*).



Another feature of tattoos that was connected with the ‘sexy’ label was tattoo *imagery*. While feminine themes such as flowers and butterflies were commonly cited as “cute” (*Lindsay, age 21*), tattooing that incorporated tribal designs or other dark artwork that is generally considered to be slightly more risqué tended to be described as “sexy” (*Jenna age 27, Dan age 28, Jess age 21*). However, imagery generally combines with other factors in determining whether tattoos will be socially viewed as ‘sexy’. While heavy black tribal work on a woman’s arms would be much more likely to be interpreted as resistant, and therefore ‘butch’ (*Angie, age 28*), the same tribal work on a concealable and more typically sexualized area such as a woman’s torso (hips, side, lower back) is more likely to be viewed as sexy or indicative of a “wild side” (*Katie, age 22*). Further, even tame imagery could have sexualized meanings depending on how their bearers understood or explained them. Asked to explain the small strawberry tattoo located along her hip, Jenna says:

I don’t know exactly how to do it, but, umm, okay I’ll be really really blunt. Pop your cherry. Very, very, female sexuality!  
And I never thought about that before. But it’s pretty true.  
(*Jenna, age 27*).

Jenna referred to the concept of “fruit [as] feminine” in Greek mythology (*Jenna, age 27*) as a means of explaining how her tattoo was representative of her sexual awakening as a young woman. She felt that the actual act of acquiring the small strawberry tattoo on her hip “was like, sexy, yeah” in relation to both the symbolism and the experience (*Jenna, age 27*). Further, many women experienced the labeling of their tattooing as ‘sexy’ in an empowering way, and indeed have selected both their tattoo location and imagery as a means of performing a femininity that is read as sexually active, and perhaps of equal importance, sexually *attractive*.

The third sexual category that was discussed in relation to female tattooing was that of the ‘slutty’ tattooed body. Just as media figures were often discussed in relation to ‘sexy’ tattooing, so too were fictional representations and media figures discussed in relation to the concept of promiscuity:

*Researcher*: So if you’re watching a TV show and a character comes on with a bunch of tattoos, what kind of character would you expect *him* to be?

*Danena (age 19)*: Badass.

*Researcher*: And if you were watching a TV show and a character comes on with a bunch of tattoos, what kind of character would you expect *her* to be?

*Danena*: Slut.

The concept of the ‘slutty’ tattooed body was discussed in relation to many of the same media figures who had previously been referenced as having ‘sexy’ tattooing, including Pamela Anderson and Britney Spears. One participant shared the following:

There is a rumor about Britney Spears’s [kanji] tattoo, that she wanted it to say happiness and they actually wrote slut on it.

That was a rumor that I heard on the radio. (*Kim, age 21*).

Another participant made reference to Pamela Anderson, who showed her tattoo in *Barbed Wire*, describing her as “the whore of the movie” (*Angie, age 28*). The same tattoos on various media figures that can be referred to as ‘sexy’ by some participants can also be referred to as ‘slutty’ by others; when discussing these media figures participants made no distinctions between the two forms of tattooing in relation to the appearance of the tattoo, other than to occasionally differentiate them as either ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’.

The associations between tattoos on women and promiscuity were also a part of participants’ own day-to-day experiences. Jess commented that women with tattoos are often viewed as “dirtier”. When asked to clarify her use of this word she suggested:

I think [they are viewed as] dirtier *sexual* for sure. I think that’s just the way they look at it. I remember I was talking to my friend, we were in Toronto, and she saw this woman, and this was before I had any tattoos. She saw this woman who had these tattoos, she was like ‘Oh my god look at that she has those tattoos, why would she get those done? Is she a streetwalker?’ (my emphasis, *Jess age 21*).

Another interviewee described the disapproval his female coworker faced over her ‘sexy’ lower back tattoo when she started dating a more religious man, suggesting that her new boyfriend “would reach over and actually pull down her top [over her lower back] so he wouldn’t see it, didn’t have to look at it” (*Al, age 50*). Al suggested that this disapproval may have been influenced by the idea that tattooing could be linked with sexual promiscuity: “I think there is something in the Bible to do with the only people marked by tattoos are prostitutes and thieves and that” (*Al, age 50*).

Some participants observed that there is a generational element to the perspective that a tattooed woman is a “whore” (*Mike, age 26*), suggesting that older more conservative individuals may hold young women to different ideals regarding body modification habits:

My grandmother thought my sister was a tramp just because she got a tattoo on her, you know? Like anywhere, it doesn’t matter. My grandmother’s like ‘she’s trashy, she’s probably having sex with ten men, she’ll have eight kids, she’s got a tattoo’. That’s just the way she was raised to think about stuff. (*Mike, age 26*).

When asked how his grandmother responded to his own much more extensive (spectacular) tattooing, Mike said, “She was disappointed in me, disappointed. She just didn’t like it. She thinks it’s gross. Whereas my sister was a whore” (*Mike, age 26*). Another interviewee explained that her father’s disapproval over her tattoos is likely related to the fact that he “comes from the era too where the only women who had tattoos were prostitutes or sex workers” (*Aimee, age 23*). Other participants, however, did not relate the association between female tattooing and promiscuity to a generational divide; rather they indicated that it is a common association even among the younger generations with whom they interact. Among their friends and 20-something co-workers, female tattooing is often linked to the concept of wildness (*Meg, age 21*) or risk taking behaviors: “Some people might see it as a more promiscuous type thing. You’ve done that to your body, what else have you done?” (*Al, age 50*). Another participant said: “They think that because you have a tattoo you’re wilder than most people. And you’re not afraid to take risks, and you’re not afraid to do whatever” (*Jess, age 21*). This perception of active engagement in the selection of a ‘sexy’ or “erotic” tattoo (*Andrew, age 21*) becomes interpreted as a signifier that the female tattooee may be a bit “wilder” in her choices (*Jess, age 21*) and is thus more likely to be promiscuous.

Interview participants indicated that the areas of the female body that are identified as sexually attractive tattoo locations are the same areas that can also potentially be interpreted as signifiers of promiscuity when encoded with tattoo messages. As one participant explained, a tattoo that is placed on a sexualized female body location is socially read as “You want to draw people’s attention there, you want their eyes to wander” (*Danena, age 19*). Thus the decision to locate a tattoo in such an area is sometimes interpreted as an invitation. Similar to the way in which the tattooed media figures could be referred to by different people as either ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’ on the basis of their tattoos, the participants did not make any distinctions between ‘sexy’ tattooing and ‘slutty’ tattooing in relation to tattoo locations, size, or imagery. And while the interviewees did not provide any distinctions in terms of the logistical difference between ‘sexy’ tattooing and ‘slutty’ tattooing, they did indicate that there is a measure of social risk associated with the acquisition of ‘slutty’ tattoos that discourages women from acquiring tattoos in specific areas. “They’re afraid that they’ll be judged... that they’ll be seen as dirty or loose or whatever awful terms they want to use to refer to sexuality” (*Aimee, age 23*).

An interesting aspect of the difference, or lack of logistical difference, between ‘sexy’ and ‘slutty’ tattoos can be viewed through the extent to which tattoo meaning has the potential to shift from ‘sexy’ to ‘slutty.’ While Pitts argued that during the 1960s women tattooed their breasts as an act of reclamation and feminist independence (Pitts 2003), the interviewees indicated that tattoos on the breasts are now commonly interpreted as promiscuous. Ryan described a breast tattoo acquired by an acquaintance, referring to it as a “highly sexualized area” (*Ryan, age 23*). He said, “I don’t now how to explain it, I just thought that

it was ridiculous. You might as well have taken a stamp and, right there” (*Ryan, age 23*). Another participant contrasted her breast tattoo with another tattoo on the back of her shoulder, saying: “this one [the breast tattoo] is trashy, and this one is not trashy. It’s just a classy thing” (*Angie, age 28*). When asked to describe the various social reactions to her breast tattoo, she explained that while the men she dated often view her breast tattoo as ‘sexy’, “it’s on the boobs, so of course”, the reactions of family, friends and coworkers were generally much more critical:

Usually it’s negative. Because when people say ‘why’d you do that’, it’s not why’d you do that in a positive spin, it’s why’d you do that you’re an idiot. Because why would you ask somebody why they did that? (*Angie, age 28*).

Angie went on to describe the extent to which her family feels that she has “ruined” her body by tattooing her breasts, and in turn made herself “not worth anything” (*Angie, age 28*). The implication is that in tattooing her breasts, a woman is decreasing her social worth and is risking being seen as “trashy” (*Angie, age 28*) or “loose” (*Aimee, age 23*). Where tattoos on the breast once served to symbolize feminist reclamation (Pitts 2003) such tattoos have undergone a shift in meaning from sexual empowerment to sexual promiscuity. This is evident both through media portrayals of breast tattooing as sexually risqué - as in the portrayal of Eve’s paw print tattoo on each breast<sup>2</sup>, or the chest pieces commonly displayed in provocative poses by the Suicide Girls<sup>3</sup> - and also in terms of the lived experiences of the interview participants. Data from the survey participants suggests that the breast is not a common area for young women to acquire tattoos, with only 6.6% of female tattooees indicating that they have a tattoo on the breast (making up only 1.5% of *all* the women in the sample), and only one interviewee having a breast tattoo (Appendix M table 1). This may reflect a sensitivity on women’s part to the meanings that others attribute to breast tattoos. While they may be understood by those who wear them as one thing, others may often see them as indicators of promiscuity.

Breasts were not the only tattoo location where there has been a shift in mainstream interpretation; participants indicated that there are other tattoo locations that have undergone a shift in meaning from ‘sexy’ to ‘slutty’. As discussed in Chapter One, both the ankles and the small of the back are also areas that have broadly been considered to be ‘appropriate’ locations for female tattoos. One participant discussed her ankle tattoos, explaining that when she acquired them they were considered an attractive location:

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<sup>2</sup> Eve Jihan Jeffers, a highly publicized female rapper and actress:  
<http://www.evefans.com/> accessed 05/15/08.

<sup>3</sup> The Suicide Girls: <http://suicidegirls.com/> accessed 05/15/08. Several interview participants referred to the suicide girls during the interviews, and one male survey participant commented (in the additional comments portion of the survey) “I like girls with Tattoos, especially SuicideGirls!” (survey participant 220).

Well I think that as a woman, we tend to accentuate certain features on our body. When I was growing up I always had relatively nice legs... legs that were in good shape. Or at least that's what everybody told me. So I put them somewhere where I knew they'd be seen, and to accentuate a part of my body that was actually nice for people to look at, you know? (*Marianne, age 36*).

But another participant observed that tattoos on the ankle are now less common among women because they are “too visible” and “white-trashy” (*Jan, age 23*). A third participant cited an article she had read where the author was describing how “you can tell the strippers apart from the regular girls, all the strippers had tattoos on their ankles” (*Aimee, age 23*). Following this shift in the social perception of ankle tattoos, Marianne says “I started to associate them with not being very classy... I used to show them off. Every chance I got I used to show them off. And now every chance I get I hide them” (*Marianne, age 36*).

Marianne's experience is indicative of the social climate surrounding female tattooing. While women often wish to emphasize certain areas of their body through the use of 'sexy' tattooing, the placement of tattoos in these locations risks being interpreted as a signifier of promiscuity. As in the case of the breast tattoo, it appears that the acquisition of a tattoo on the ankle is no longer a popular selection, with only 17.8% of female tattooees in the survey sample indicating that they actually have a tattoo in this location (making up 3.9% of *all* of the women in the survey sample) (Appendix M table 1). It is interesting that while tattooed female bodies can be categorized sexually as either 'butch' tattoos, 'sexy' tattoos, or 'slutty' tattoos, there appears to be little logistical difference between what tattoos are viewed as 'sexy' or 'slutty.' Due to this lack of distinction the designation of a tattoo as 'sexy' always has the potential to undergo a shift in meaning wherein it becomes reinterpreted as 'slutty'.

The potential ways in which female tattooed bodies are interpreted in relation to sexuality is evident not only in the literature and in the media, but also in the day-to-day lives of the interviewees, as are the ways in which young women must negotiate this discourse on sexual tattooing. While 'butch' tattooing may be experienced by women as empowering, it is also experienced by many other women in a negative and disempowering way – as a criticism of their tattoo selections. When women acquire 'sexy' tattoos instead, their 'sexy' tattoo art can be experienced as an emotionally and socially empowering acquisition, but can also be socially risky in the sense that they can be reinterpreted over time as 'slutty' tattoos. The survey data was also revealing in this respect. 25.6% of survey participants indicated that a woman with a small/somewhat hidden tattoo would be more likely to sleep around (than a woman with no tattoo). Meanwhile, only 11.9% of participants indicating that a *man* with a small/somewhat hidden tattoo would be more likely to sleep around (than a man with no tattoo) by comparison (Appendix L tables 29 and 30). Clearly this association between tattooing and promiscuity is a critique that is applied more heavily to female

tattooes than to males. I would argue that the sexual interpretations of the female tattooed body are more than simply categories into which women's bodies are put on the basis of their tattoos; rather these interpretations provide social functions in terms of valuing or devaluing particular tattoo projects on women. To have 'sexy' tattoos can be understood positively, while to have one's tattoo labeled as 'butch' or 'slutty' is more often than not understood and experienced as a negative judgment of a woman's tattoo selections.

### **The *Tramp Stamp* Label**

While in the previous section I discussed several of the locations where a tattoo could come to be interpreted as 'sexy' or 'slutty', in the following section I will discuss more specifically both the acquisition of, and labeling of, the lower back tattoo on women. I define the label *tramp stamp* as well as the many other interchangeable terms that were used to refer to the lower back tattoo by the interviewees, as well as discuss the various meanings that are associated with this label when it is applied to female tattooees.

The *tramp stamp*, also often referred to as the *bullseye*, is a popular culture label that refers to the immensely popular tattoo that is commonly acquired on a woman's lower back. The location of the tattoo is generally just above the pant line of young women's 'low rise' jeans. The tattoo size can vary from a very small tattoo to a mid-size tattoo that spans almost the entire width of the lower back. Meg indicated that the tattoo most typically "has a curved shape around it. And it's around 2 inches to four inches" (*Meg, age 21*). Occasionally the tattoo curls upwards on either side from the centre (spine) following the curvature of the back - almost resembling the aesthetics of the female g-string or thong lingerie - but the label can also be applied to larger or smaller symbols on the lower back that do not appear in this shape. In terms of imagery, a *tramp stamp* tattoo is often comprised of either a black ink tribal designs or Asian script such as Kanjii lettering (*Meg, age 21*), or other similar imagery that is commonly associated with flash tattooing such as butterflies, stars, flowers, or occasionally Celtic knots. Katie described *tramp stamps* this way:

Sometimes it's like, either a flower or a tribal thing. So either a flower blooming, or like it's just petals or whatever. Some sort of, I would characterize it as purely classically understood as being a feminine image. Or it's a tribal thing that kind of spans the back part of your waist, or frames it a little bit. (*Katie, age 22*).

These descriptions reveal that the *tramp stamp* is to some degree a negotiated tattoo. In other words, the tattoo is often (although not always) 'feminine', the location is perceived as appropriate for women (Appendix L table 30), and it is also generally a concealed, or easily concealable, tattoo.

When the tattoo first became popular is unclear, although some interviewees suggested that the tattoo industry experienced a surge in interest in this tattoo location/style in the early 2000s:

I can clearly remember the first time I saw the lower back tattoo thing... It was a Britney spears *I'm a slave* music video. And they were all like sweaty. That was the first time. She has it on the back. This was like six years ago. I remember seeing it and being like that is such a skanky... I was just shaking my head. And what do you know, the rise in me seeing actual other people I knew with that back sort of tattoo increased dramatically. (*Katie, age 22*).

Atkinson suggested in his analysis of tattooing in 2003 that the lower back tattoo was at that time one of the most common tattoo selections among young women (Atkinson 2003), a statement that is consistent with the time frame of the early 2000s proposed by the interviewees. Some interviewees made reference to the fact that “all the pop stars have them” (*Katie, age 22*), which has in turn influenced the popularity of the location for many young women. Other interviewees mentioned that this tattoo is often one of the first tattoos acquired by young women. For example, Al said the following when talking about his much younger tattooed coworkers:

Location, yeah, I think we're talking that the lower back seems very very common for women. I can think just off the top of my head five female coworkers that all have the lower back tattoo, uh, and in some cases you know that's the only tattoo they have. And some other cases they have other tattoos but that was their first. (*Al, age 50*).

The survey results indicated that 40% of female tattooees have a tattoo on the lower back, making up approximately 8.8% of *all* young women in the overall undergraduate sample (Appendix M table 1). The survey data also shows that the lower back tattoo is acquired almost exclusively *by* women, and that the label tramp stamp seems to be applied only *to* women.<sup>4</sup> The interviewees indicated that they know of no similar tattoo, or tattoo label, that relates to male promiscuity, “Yeah I don't think there's a male *tramp stamp*. I don't think there is” (*Dana, age 19*). The label *tramp stamp* is applied to female tattooees only, and it is a label that is especially important due to the widespread popularity of the lower back tattoo among young women. Both the recent popularity as well as the prevalence of this tattoo highlight the necessity of analyzing the various attitudes

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<sup>4</sup> When asked what would happen if a man acquired a similar tattoo on the lower back, the participants responded that people would think that the man was “gay” (Greg, age 23) or a “pansy” (Ritchie, age 21), and that “it would just be something you would get mocked over” (Dan, age 28). The interviewees generally indicated that men do not acquire ‘sexy’ lower back tattoos in the way that women do, an assessment that was supported through the survey data. While 40% of female tattooees indicated that they have a tattoo on the lower back, only 11.8% of male tattooees indicated the same.

towards this tattoo, and the extent to which the dialogues surrounding the selection of this tattoo may have an impact on the lives of not only female tattooees, but of young women in general.

The subject of the *tramp stamp* emerged repeatedly through the course of the interviews, despite the fact that there were no questions in the interview guide specific to this tattoo location or label. Discussions around the *tramp stamp* related to three main themes, i) ‘slutty’ tattooing and the association with tattooee promiscuity, ii) assumptions regarding lower back tattoo ‘meaninglessness’, iii) and the social devaluation or loss of respect that is often attributed to the women who acquire this tattoo. The lower back tattoo location was occasionally referenced in a more positive context as a ‘sexy’ tattoo by both male and female interviewees. “It’s just hot” Jenna said (*Jenna age 27*), and “Oh, so sexy. I love them” was Scott’s observation (*Scott age 26*). However, generally the tattoo was discussed in more negative terms, and usually in the context of the various labels that have become attached to it.

In defining the label *tramp stamp*, it is necessary to first clarify that both the *tramp stamp* and the *bullseye* are phrases that were often used interchangeably by interview participants in a very open allusion to sexual promiscuity: “The tramp stamp... The lower back thing. It’s the bullseye, you know. It’s the stamp. If you get it you’re like a tramp” (*Dana, age 19*). Another participant explained, “my friend told me [about] it. For tattoos on the lower back they call it a tramp stamp, that it’s almost slutty.... It has something to do with the target, for guys to stare right at their butt” (*Kim, age 21*). When asked to clarify the meaning of this tattoo Kim stated, “a lot of people think if you have a tattoo on your lower back that you’re like easy, that you’re willing to, you know, pick up guys or whatever” (*Kim, age 21*). The survey results indicated that 48.2% of survey participants were familiar with the phrase *tramp stamp* and 38.7% had heard of the alternative phrase *bullseye* specifically in relation to female lower back tattoos (Appendix L table 37). Additionally, 19.9% of survey respondents were not only familiar with the terms in a general way, but had also overheard a female friend or acquaintance with a lower back tattoo being directly labeled with one of these terms (Appendix L table 39). The survey revealed various sources of information regarding the *tramp stamp*, with the majority indicating that they had heard the term used by their friends (74.6% of the participants who were familiar with these phrases indicated that they had heard the terms used at school, and 71.2% claimed to have heard the terms at social gatherings with their friends/peers) (Appendix L table 38).

That the widespread use of the label has a tangible impact on the lives of young women was demonstrated in one young woman’s statement, written in the ‘additional comments’ portion of the online survey:

I once considered getting a small rose on my lower back, but my boyfriend called it a ‘tramp stamp’ so I decided against it. He said that he viewed girls with tattoos as ‘slutty’, so I thus don’t want a tattoo anymore. (*Female Survey Participant 14*).



As the interviewees indicated, when a woman's lower back tattoo is referred to as a *tramp stamp* or a *bullseye*, it is the same thing as referring to the woman as "a slut" (*Amber age 22, Meg age 21*), "a whore" (*Dana age 19, Ashley age 21*), "skanky" (*Katie, age 22*), "a hooter" (*Katie, age 22*), "loose" (*Danena age 19, Anne age 25, Amanda age 23*) and various other slang versions of the term promiscuous.

Further, the definitions of the various other terms synonymous with *tramp stamp* often used physical descriptors that are clearly pornographic in nature. One interview participant, after acquiring a tattoo on her lower back, afterwards heard of them referred to as "whorens" (*Jan, age 23*) - a pun on the word 'horns' that is linked to the upwards swirl on either side of the spine in many lower back tribal designs, and is suggestive of handles that may be grabbed during sexual intercourse (while in the 'doggy position'). Another interviewee was told by his friends that the lower back tattoo is called the "doggy style tattoo" because "when you do it doggy style you can see the tattoo" (*Dan, age 28*). Explaining why he feels the lower back tattoo "exhibits sexuality", another participant said: "Who sees it? Who sees [that] tattoo unless it's in a kind of sexual position right?" (*Derrick, age 32*). References to sexual positions were often used in talking about this tattoo, with occasional references to strippers commonly having lower back tattoos as well (*Dan, age 28*), highlighting the heavily sexualized connotations that have developed around the use of this term.

Both the interviews and the surveys made it clear that the internet is a common source for the associations made between the lower back tattoo, the *tramp stamp* label, and sexual promiscuity. Of the survey participants who had heard of the phrases *tramp stamp* or *bullseye*, 28.5% claimed to have seen them used on the internet (Appendix L table 38). Additionally, the interview participants referenced websites such as *Wikipedia*<sup>5</sup> and *Urban Dictionary*<sup>6</sup> in their descriptions of the lower back tattoo, making claims such as the following: "Everybody on the internet calls it the tramp stamp, I know that" (*Dana, age 19*). Participants went so far as recommending various websites where I could read about the *tramp stamp*, or suggesting that I "google it" (*Matt, age 21*). *Wikipedia*, one of the websites recommended, refers to the lower back tattoo as "an object of derision in some quarters" adding: "Detractors consider lower back tattoos as suggestive of promiscuity"<sup>7</sup>. Likewise *Urban Dictionary* has an entry for *tramp stamp*, describing it as "A tattoo on the small of a woman's back... a good clue if you should wrap it up or not"<sup>8</sup>. This is a recommendation for condom use that

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<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia: "tramp stamp" [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tramp\\_stamp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tramp_stamp)], Retrieved 04/02/07.

<sup>6</sup> Urban Dictionary: "tramp stamp" [<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tramp+stamp>], Retrieved 04/02/07.

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia: "lower back tattoo" [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower\\_back\\_tattoo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_back_tattoo)], Retrieved 05/03/08.

<sup>8</sup> Urban Dictionary: "tramp stamp" [<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tramp+stamp>], Retrieved 05/03/08.

hinges on the assumption that intercourse with a woman with a lower back tattoo entails risk, and the possibility of contracting a venereal disease. The same website also refers to the label bullseye as “A tattoo on the lower back of a person (hopefully female)... *I missed the bullseye last night. I will give it another try tonight!*”<sup>9</sup> The reference here is to a metaphorical ‘bullseye’ (read: concentric circles) where a man should aim his ejaculate following heterosexual intercourse with a woman, once again while in the ‘doggy style’ position. Another participant explained that he had heard the lower back tattoo referred to as the “slag tag” by both his friends and on the internet (*Matt, age 21*). The phrase ‘slag tag’ (rhyming with ‘shag tag’) is an allusion to the sexual promiscuity that is associated with having multiple sexual partners through the playing of an anonymous sex game.<sup>10</sup> References to sexual intercourse, sexual positions, and female promiscuity abounded in these definitions both online and off, although in talking with interview participants it became clear that the term *tramp stamp* and its various synonyms have many much more subtle implications that go beyond just the popular culture allusions to sexual intercourse and female promiscuity.

Another trend consistently discussed by the interview participants in relation to the lower back tattoo relates to the concept of tattoo ‘meaning’ that was discussed extensively in Chapter One. While the meanings that some participants attributed to the *tramp stamp* were strongly suggestive and negative, for others the *tramp stamp* was dismissed as a ‘meaningless’ tattoo. As one interviewee indicated, “They have no meaning, they absolutely have no meaning. And it’s a broad statement and I’m making it, but absolutely no meaning” (*Meg, age 21*). Another participant grouped lower back tattoos with other tattoos that he perceived to be ‘meaningless’ tattoos on the basis of the normally small size of a tattoo placed on the lower back as well as the trendiness of the location:

Truly I believe that the *smaller* the tattoo the less thought was put into it... There’s obviously the *typical* spots. Centre of the back for girls more so than a guy, I found. (my emphasis, *Mike, age 26*).

Mike indicates that because small tattoos and trendy tattoo locations indicate that little thought has been put into the tattoo selection, the lower back tattoo is categorized as a ‘meaningless’ tattoo.

The presumed ‘meaninglessness’ that is associated with the lower back tattoo could also be linked to the *imagery* associated with lower back tattoos. As discussed earlier, tattoo imagery that is associated with *flash tattooing* (tattoo art that is selected from a wall or a book) is often perceived to be ‘meaninglessness’ in relation to the tattooees lived history. It was commonly suggested by the

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<sup>9</sup> Urban Dictionary: “bullseye”

[<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bullseye>], Retrieved 05/03/08.

<sup>10</sup> Urban Dictionary: “slag tag”

[<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slag+tag>], Retrieved 04/02/07.

Also Urban Dictionary: “shag tag” [<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shag+tag>], Retrieved 04/02/07.

interviewees that lower back tattoos are often (but not always) comprised of such flash images. As one participant said: “If you just say, I want that [image] off the wall, and then slap it on your lower back, that’s a tramp stamp” (*Dana, age 19*). Danena (*age 19*) put it this way: “A butterfly, a flower, a tribal design, something that is purely just art. It doesn’t have any meaning, and they just get it on their lower back, that’s what I think. Another interviewee indicated that when women acquire lower back tattoos, “it’s always a lotus flower, or the skanky tribal one. It doesn’t actually mean anything” (*Katie, age 22*), thereby clearly linking the two flash images as a means of determining the ‘meaninglessness’ of the lower back tattoo. Thus the interviewees indicated that the lower back tattoo (or the *tramp stamp*) is a ‘meaningless’ tattoo on the basis of the trendiness of the location, the (often) small size of the tattoo, as well as based upon the imagery (generally said to be flash and sometimes overtly ‘feminine’ flash).

In Chapter One, I argued that tattoos that are viewed as ‘meaninglessness’ can result in a loss of respect for the tattooee. This is true for the *tramp stamp* as well. Interview participants were often very passionate in their beliefs that the acquisition of a lower back tattoo results in criticism of not only the tattoo itself, but also of *the women who acquire this tattoo*. Participants suggested that when a woman selects a *tramp stamp*, she is viewed as “stupid” (*Dana, age 19*) or “vapid” (*Meg, age 21*). When asked to clarify how seeing a lower back tattoo on a woman might induce a loss of respect, one participant tried to explain by referring to her developing opinion of me as her interviewer:

[W]hen I see that [tattoo], I just, like if you had the lower back tattoo, in my mind a little bit I’d be a little bit disappointed. Just a little bit. Not that I know everything about you, but you know, with what I know of you this far, I think I would be just a little bit disappointed. (*Beth, age 21*).

Meg continues on with a similar line of thought, suggesting:

They’re all into the girlyness. And I’m like, is that really how you rate your womanhood? With your fuckin’ butterflies or your tiger lilies or your fairies?... *the respect drops a peg*” (my emphasis, *Meg, age 21*).

The interviewees indicated that this loss of respect was due to the ‘meaninglessness’ associated with the tattoo, and yet it was suggested that it isn’t only the imagery and location that causes the tattoo to be viewed as ‘meaningless’. Rather, the participants suggested that they feel many women acquire tattoos in this location simply to appeal to men, and thus are interpreted as not having a legitimate reason for acquiring this tattoo. As one interviewee stated, “It [the tattoo] doesn’t actually mean anything... if you want to get a lower back tattoo, you just want to look sexy” (*Katie, age 22*). She continued on to explain:

I feel like a lot of the girls, I don’t want to call them chicks, but a lot of the chicks who get the lower back tattoos, they’re the same ones who also have the belly button piercing. They’re not

doing it for themselves, they're doing it to please guys. That's what I have a problem with. (*Katie, age 22*).

Katie argues that while the women who acquire lower back tattoos wish to be viewed as 'sexy' and empowered, what they are really doing is showing "how big a slut, or how dirty" they are, which can then be related back to the *lack of meaning* associated with the tattoo, which she feels women acquire because they "just want to look sexy" (*Katie, age 22*). This suggests that the lower back tattoo is viewed as a 'meaningless' tattoo in part because it *is* viewed as 'slutty', and that there is overlap in these two categories. To put it in other words, while women may acquire the lower back tattoo as a means of presenting themselves as sexually attractive, *the desire to be 'sexy' is not viewed as a legitimate reason to get a tattoo*. As a result, the tattoo becomes viewed as both 'slutty' and 'meaningless', with participants very strongly indicating that they would lose respect for a woman if they thought that she acquired such a tattoo for the 'wrong' reasons: "I'm just as irritated at them for being such a ditzzy vapid human being that they can't even think about the connotation that their tattoo has" (*Meg, age 21*).

The negative attributions that are connected with the label *tramp stamp* are also reflected in the ways in which young women who actually *have* the lower back tattoo discuss their tattoos. Kim recounts an exchange she had with a co-worker:

*Kim (age 21)*: [M]y friend, one girl from work, we were talking about tattoos. I said I have a tattoo on my back and she was like 'oh don't tell me you have a tramp stamp'. And I was like 'no no no, it's on the side really low you can't really see'. She was like 'oh my god thank god, I didn't want you to be a victim'.

*Researcher*: And what was she worried about you being a victim of?

*Kim*: The cliché that so many girls have a tattoo there.

Kim's experience reflects the ways in which female tattooees who have a lower back tattoo often distance their tattoo selections as much as possible from the negative label *tramp stamp*. As Kim's comments demonstrate, the label *tramp stamp*, while often defined in relation to the promiscuity of the tattooee, maintains much of its most powerful critique in relation to the concept of 'cliché' or trendy tattooing, otherwise known as the 'meaninglessness' that is associated with this label. Many female tattooees not only tried to distance their lower back tattoos from this label, but also expressed frustration with the conclusions that others jumped to about why they chose this tattoo location. Jess discussed her lower back tattoo in this context, referring to the sense of powerlessness she feels over how the meaning associated with lower back tattoos has shifted since she first acquired hers:

Yeah [I got mine] before it got big, that's what irritates me. You do something and then it gets big, and everyone thinks you're *just one of those people*. It's like 'I got it done before that!!!!' (my emphasis, *Jess, age 21*)

Jess's experience highlights the extent to which the 'meaninglessness' of the tattoo has been culturally constructed over time; when Jess first acquired her lower back tattoo, it was not viewed as a 'slutty' or 'meaningless' tattoo and she would not have been considered "just one of those people" who had bought into the trendiness of the tattoo location.

It is also the case that the meaning of the lower back tattoo has shifted from 'sexy' to 'slutty.' Beth contrasts the popularity of lower back tattoo when it first came out as a more "subtly sexy" tattoo to the 'trashiness' that is commonly associated with breast tattoos, arguing that the lower back tattoo is now shifting towards the interpretation of 'trashy' as well:

*Beth (age 21):* It's not an overtly sexy area [on the lower back], but it's definitely one of those more *subtly sexy* areas. Like, how often do you see someone's lower back? You know? And then with that tattoo, if they're wearing a top that's more short, and pants whatever, that's the only time you really get to glimpse it. Or depending on what type of swimsuit they wear. So it's more geared towards something in a sexual nature. But like someone who gets their ass or their boob tattooed, that's kind of more... well... I don't know.

*Researcher:* Would a breast be a more sexual [tattoo], not as subtle? Is that what you mean?

*Beth:* Yeah it's not as... <pause> like I think that putting it on your breast or putting it on your ass is the more trashier version. Whereas this [the lower back] is the new cool place to put it. Well five years ago maybe.

Both Beth's quotation, and the descriptions provided by other interviewees who acquired their lower back tattoo "before it got big" (*Jess, age 21*) point to a shift in meaning of the lower back tattoo similar to the shift that the ankle and breast tattoo have undergone. While they might once have been viewed as subtle, concealable and feminine tattoos, they are more likely now to be defined as a *tramp stamp*, and to invite assumptions that the women who wear them are either promiscuous or vacuous. This shift in meaning is a critical aspect of understanding the *tramp stamp*; it places the lower back tattoo within the same realm as the breast and ankle tattoos – tattoos that were at one time associated with sexual empowerment, but are now in many instances negatively reinterpreted by those who view them.

The dialogue surrounding the tramp stamp in relation to promiscuity and tattoo ‘meaninglessness’ is not unlike the previously discussed ‘slutty’ tattoos and ‘meaningless’ tattoos. If we can accept that the person who interprets the tattooed body has the power to determine whether a person’s tattoo is ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’, ‘meaningful’ or ‘meaningless’, then we can accept that this same process is occurring in relation to the *tramp stamp*. The ‘meaningless’ tattoo is a social construct, a label that serves to *devalue* the tattoo, and through association the body upon which it is inscribed, regardless of whether the tattoo has personal meaning, significance or sentimentality for the tattooee. Further, tattoo meanings often shift over time from their interpretation as ‘sexy’ tattoos to that of ‘slutty’ tattoos. The lower back tattoo has experienced a shift in public opinion that now situates it as a *delegitimated* tattoo selection for women – one that facilitates not only a negative interpretation of the tattoo itself, but also a negative interpretation of the woman who wears it.

### **Sexual Agency vs. Practicality in Selecting the *Tramp Stamp***

In the final section of this chapter I discuss the dialogue on sexual agency and practicality, or the reasons that were provided for why women choose to tattoo themselves on the lower back in the face of the negative social judgements surrounding the label *tramp stamp*. While lower back tattoos were often interpreted as a sign of sexual agency - an intentional display of ‘sexiness’ with the intent to ‘pick up’ – many young women provided alternative reasons for why the lower back is a desirable location for a tattoo.

In ‘reading’ lower back tattoos on women, interviewees commonly assumed a certain degree of *agency* on the part of women who select lower back tattoos. Simply put, the interviewees believed that women are *aware* of the attributions that will be made regarding their tattoo selection, especially in relation to labels such as ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’, and thus when another person sees this tattoo they are inclined to “take them at their word” (*Beth, age 21*). That is, others are likely to interpret the tattoo as an *intentional* display of availability. As many of the interviewees argued, women know that the lower back tattoo “exhibits sexuality” (*Derrick, age 32*) and will reflect “hyper-sexuality” (*Ashley, age 21*). Amber commented “I don’t think girls are unaware of that” connotation (*Amber, age 21*). Another interviewee put it this way:

I’m like okay now you’ve got me looking in that area because there’s a tattoo there, so, *you want* people looking at you like that, *so people might think okay you’re easy* or something like that. And you’re prey now, if it’s a guy who is a predator. In the sense of the game right. (my emphasis, *Derrick, age 32*).

Greg was even more blunt, explaining that when a person acquires a tattoo, it is viewed as:

A choice you made. So it does reflect something about you.

You don't just get one randomly. You have made a decision at some point, so that says something about you. (*Greg, age 23*).

Derrick continues on to explain that due to this concept of agency, women with the lower back tattoo may be interpreted as intentionally presenting themselves as promiscuous; “they present themselves as a very sexual being” (*Derrick, age 32*).

The assumption of agency and awareness is particularly likely in cases where women are viewed as intentionally *displaying* their lower back tattoos. “They go out of their way perhaps to make it [the lower back tattoo] be seen. Wearing pants that might be a little low cut, or shirts that stop right above the tattoo.” (*Ashley, age 21*). Katie argued:

Okay what I'm trying to say is that when girls make that choice, to get that tattoo there, it's sort of like when we dress up extra nice at a bar to pick up. So it's another form of picking up almost. You're trying to draw attention to how... yeah I'm this girl. I'm kind of wild, but not too wild, I have this socially acceptable tattoo on my lower back. *Don't you think it's sexy?* Because everybody else does. Doesn't Britney Spears have one? Don't all these other people have them? I have them too because *I'm like that. They're trying to cash in, or associate themselves*, it's like the way people dress. They're also the ones who dress the most similarly to celebrities. It's just one of those things. (my emphasis, *Katie, age 22*).

This association between the tattoo location and ‘picking up’ hinges on the pervasive belief that the main reason that young women choose to acquire this tattoo is to appear ‘sexy’, and to portray themselves as sexually available and interested.

These assumptions also become the basis for others’ responses. The lower back tattoo is used by many young men as a way of choosing which young woman they should approach in a social setting – otherwise succinctly referred to as the ‘pick up’ by several of the interviewees (*Katie age 22, Kim age 21*). This view has been popularized by the box office hit *The Wedding Crashers*<sup>11</sup>. This

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<sup>11</sup> *The Wedding Crashers*. 2006. Universal Studios.

The premise of this particular movie is one in which two young men spend considerable amounts of time ‘crashing’ (attending uninvited) the weddings of people that they do not know in an attempt to ‘pick up’ young women who are “so aroused by the idea of marriage that they’ll throw their inhibitions to the wind”, and will thus be more easy to pick up for a one night stand. These ‘pick ups’ are represented as a series of sexual conquests – with images of various young women falling onto beds topless or dressed in skimpy lingerie, having been fooled by the game tactics of the young men who have presented themselves at each wedding as desirable family men, or ‘marriage material’. The *bullseye* tattoo is thus referenced in the movie during a wedding reception scene by one of the male protagonists, who, in evaluating his ‘prospects’, comments “Tattoo on the lower back. Might as well be a bullseye.”<sup>11</sup>, and thus targets the female tattooee accordingly with his attentions in an attempt to procure a one night stand. This female character, targeted and approached because of her lower back tattoo, becomes yet another nameless female

movie was consistently referred to by the interviewees when discussing lower back tattoos. One young woman explained:

[T]here's that terrible quote from the *Wedding Crashers* trailer, which is 'if she's got the tattoo on the lower back it's a bullseye'. You know, like she's a slut. It's like *the go ahead sign*, if she has the tattoo in the lower back. (my emphasis, *Amber, age 22*).

Another participant said:

I knew a guy who would always use it as a pick up line. One of my friends. If he could see it just a little bit, he would go up to her and ask her about it. What it is, what it means. And it worked surprisingly well... He said watch this, I'm going to go ask her about that tattoo on her back, and I bet you she'll talk to me for awhile. (*Greg, age 23*).

Several other participants also discussed lower back tattoos in the same context of the 'pick up': "I've heard that *guys in the bars* think if you've got a tattoo on your lower back, you're easy" (my emphasis, *Amanda, age 23*).

In some cases the assumptions made about lower back tattoos and women's sexual agency have some basis in fact. Some women know precisely what kinds of messages about themselves that they are communicating through their tattoo selections, and decide on lower back tattoos intentionally. For some women, the intentional use of the lower back tattoo as a means of expressing sexual agency can be experienced as empowering:

It's easy to have it hidden, so it would be socially acceptable or whatnot. But then again you can always have it kind of peek out and it's kind of intriguing... my friend who got hers [lower back tattoo]... it was always, like for her it was almost something to get guys interested, type thing (*Tracy, age 25*).

Jess likewise indicated, "one of my boyfriends said... it's really hot" (*Jess, age 21*). But while some women may enjoy the attention they receive as the result of their 'sexy' tattoos, in other cases (or other contexts) women also may find these assumptions objectionable:

I read an article two days ago in the *Toronto Star* about how guys pick out slutty girls if they have the back tattoo. I was reading this going wow, that makes me want to cover it up then... When I got my tattoo they weren't really that big in the small of the back (*Jess, age 21*).

Jess explains that for many young women, their reasons for getting a lower back tattoo may have nothing to do with proclaiming their sexuality or availability. In fact, one of the common reasons that many women gave for acquiring the lower back tattoo has to do with the *practicality* of the tattoo

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character in the sexual escapades of the young men – only one of the many young women who are 'picked up' by the male protagonists, slept with, and then disposed of following the trickery.



location in relation to traditional female roles. The various roles that a young woman will be expected to perform throughout her lifetime may lead her to choose a tattoo that she feels will “span that test of time” (*Beth, age 21*) in terms of permanency, and at the same time may potentially minimize the possibilities for negative judgements. When discussing the issues of practicality in this context, many of the female interviewees referred to marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood, as well as the concept of graceful aging. These are the practical considerations that were suggested to have a direct impact on women’s proclivity towards the lower back tattoo.

A common scenario envisioned by female tattooees was their wedding day. One interviewee reflected: “They say never get it where you’ll see it in your wedding dress... What about your wedding day, you’re going to have a tattoo in your wedding picture?” (*Dana, age 19*). Tattooed survey respondents indicated a similar consideration, with 47.7% of female tattooees saying that “my wedding” would be an occasion on which they would wish to conceal their tattoo(s); 64.3% of male tattooed survey respondents indicated the same, with the obvious difference that while wedding day propriety may be a concern for both men and women, traditional mainstream North American wedding attire limits women more than men in terms of the locations where they can safely acquire a tattoo. While women are expected to acquire tattoos that are concealable in a wedding dress, limiting them almost entirely to the torso and lower body in terms of tattoo placement, male wedding propriety only precludes the acquisition of male tattoos on the hands, neck and face, as these are the only areas that are typically visible in male wedding attire. Doug confirmed: “They say never get it where you’ll see it in your wedding dress. Do they say that to guys? No. So I think that’s a social taboo, you can’t get it there [in a visible location, as] it’s so much trashier if you’re female” (*Doug, age 22*).

One participant had briefly considered getting a tattoo on her collarbone, but rejected what she felt would be an attractive location out of consideration for wedding propriety, “But then if I get married and I want to wear a dress, I don’t want to have a picture of a tattoo right there” (*Kim, age 21*). Expanding on her reasoning, she compared the traditional version of what a bride should look like with her understanding of visible female tattoos as a more juvenile acquisition:

*Researcher:* So why wouldn’t you want them in your wedding photos?

*Kim:* ... [There was] a wedding where this girl had tattoos when I worked at the golf course. She had like birds tattooed on her chest, it looked so beautiful when she was getting ready for the wedding. But then when it was the ceremony – because we get to like sneak in the bushes and watch the ceremonies – it was just like, I dunno I guess she didn’t look like a grown up getting married. Like she looked like she was a lot younger, and I mean

it's good to look young, but I dunno just something about it, it just doesn't seem like it was... right. I don't know how else to say it.

*Researcher:* Like it didn't look right compared to what you expected a bride to look like?

*Kim:* Yeah I guess it looked out of place, like they put the wedding dress on the wrong person.

The reference to the tattooed bride not looking “grown up”, and appearing as if “they put the wedding dress on the wrong person” can be related to the more common association of tattooing with a more juvenile display of self, something that is situated as at-odds with the maturation that is more commonly associated with marriage. Kim chose to acquire her tattoo on the lower back instead of the collarbone, a more concealable location that would presumably not be visible in her future wedding photos.

Another substantial consideration for women in choosing a tattoo location was pregnancy. One woman commented: “If you're a woman and you get it done on your stomach, if you're pregnant tattoos stretch out and don't look very nice after. I've heard it just looks disgusting” (*Jan, age 23*). Jan chose to place her tattoo on the lower back, rather than risk placing it in a place where it might potentially stretch due to childbearing later in life. If it does not occur to women to think about tattoo locations in this light, it may actually be pointed out to them. In one case it was suggested to a participant by her tattooist that she should think about switching her tattoo placement from her hip to her lower back so that it would not become an issue if she were ever to become pregnant:

Well basically I wanted to get it up front [on my hips] more, but umm the guy that I was getting the tattoo [done by] said I should get it back more. Because if I were to ever have a child it would stretch and shift. (*Ashley, age 21*).

In light of this advice, Ashley acquired her tattoo on her lower back instead of on the front of her hip. Likewise Anne explained the practicality of the lower back tattoo acquired by many of her friends in relation to the possibility of pregnancy:

I think about five of my friends have them [lower back tattoos], which is quite a bit yeah. Any area it seems on women that's shallow and not very fatty, they know it's not gonna stretch too much. Because women do think about if I have a baby what will this do to the tattoo? (*Anne, age 25*).

Apart from the look of a tattoo on a pregnant body there were concerns about others' reaction to such a sight:

I think I knew someone who got like, something done around their bellybutton. And I think I explicitly said when you have children that will be the most hideous thing ever. I think I

explicitly judged her on it when she showed me. It was very rude of me, but I couldn't believe she didn't think about that. (*Anne, age 25*).

Thus it would appear that future pregnancy is a practical issue in tattoo placement for many young women, not only in relation to a female tattooee's own concerns of stretching, but also in relation to the potential critique of others if a young woman places a tattoo in such an area.

Other participants talked less about pregnancy and more about motherhood. One participant explains her regrets about getting her ankle tattoos: I was 22, 23 when I got them. You're going to feel very differently ten years from now. You're going to have different interests. You're going to have different likes. You're going to feel different about yourself. You're going to feel differently about your body. You're going to feel - you know you may have children by then. (*Marianne, age 36*).

Marianne's visible tattoos are situated as at-odds with motherhood; her comments suggest that tattoos that are not easily concealable may no longer be desirable once the female tattooee moves into the more traditional social status of motherhood. While comedic parodies of the lower back tattoo place even this very concealable tattoo location as a "silly mistake" in the context of motherhood<sup>12</sup>, many young women indicated that the lower back is an ideal location if a woman is concerned about the display of tattoos during future motherhood, because of its concealability. Following her reference to motherhood, Marianne said:

*Marianne (age 36)*: I think if I had to do it differently I would have gotten one somewhere nobody could see. Not right out where... you know I don't think there's anything wrong with having one you know on your back, or somewhere where no one can see. But I got it in a really obvious spot...

*Researcher*: Mmmmhmm. So what location would you choose if you were doing it over again?

*Marianne*: If I could take those, if you said you could, you have to keep those tattoos, but you have to move them, I'd probably do them somewhere on my back. <gestures to lower back area>

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to Appendix O for a transcript of the Saturday Night Live clip on "Tattoo Remover", a skit that focuses specifically on women's lower back tattoos.

A final consideration in the selection of tattoo location had to do with the concept of graceful aging. Asked to provide advice on tattoo selection to a person who might be considering acquiring a tattoo, participants often answered by making reference to the potential for regrets later on in life:

Picture yourself as an old lady or as an old man, and you know, is that something that you're going to want to have at that age? Umm, 'cause I mean, as you age it's not just a matter of, well there is young clothing and more mature clothing. And it's not that maturing means you're not this age any more you can't wear it, it's that *that flatters you more*. As you grow older. There's dressing, so it's the same with tattoos. Is that going to be something that's going to be flattering for you at that age?... It's permanent. It's not like clothes you can't just change it. Is it going to span that test of time? Is this something that is forever? (my emphasis, *Beth, age 21*).

The survey data confirmed that the fear of regret later in life is more of an issue for women than for men, with 63.5% of female survey respondents indicating that they do not have a tattoo because they are afraid they might change their mind later, and only 43.3% of male tattooees indicating the same (Appendix M tables 11 and 12). The fear of regret not only discourages young women from acquiring tattoos, but also encourages those who do acquire tattoos to get them in an easily concealable location so that the tattoo may be easily hidden in the event that it is no longer viewed as “flattering” in terms of graceful aging as a woman.

Thus, while many of the interviewees interpreted the lower back tattoo within the context of sexual agency, and the intentional display of ‘sexiness’ or sexual availability – and while this interpretation was correct in some cases - it is clear that many *other* young women acquire lower back tattoos for reasons that have little to do with the sending of these messages. Instead, the selection of the lower back tattoo is the *logical result* of thinking through the traditional social roles that women are expected to perform, not only in relation to the selection of ‘appropriate’ tattoos more broadly speaking, but also in relation to roles such as bride, pregnant woman, mother and aging woman. Many of the locations that were cited as ‘appropriate’ tattoo locations for young women in Chapter One (hips, back of the shoulder, ankles, etc.) are locations that are not viewed as practical for many young women when they consider their wedding day, motherhood, and aging. Though the *tramp stamp* has become interpreted as an indication of promiscuity and sexual availability, the practicality of the tattoo location as a means of conforming to traditional expectations, and the reasons that many young women have provided for selecting this area, suggests otherwise. For many young women, the lower back tattoo is a way of having a (sexually attractive) tattoo without necessarily creating problems for themselves later in life, since the lower back is so easily concealed *or* revealed, depending on the occasion and current social role of the tattooee.

## Summary

In this chapter I have looked at the female tattooed body and sexual labeling. While tattooing upon the female body is often interpreted within the realm of negotiated or resistant tattooing (as discussed in Chapter One), it is clear that these interpretations often take the form of categorizing women's tattoos in relation to sexuality. The interviewees referenced three forms of tattooing in this context, including 'butch' tattooing, 'sexy' tattooing, and 'slutty' tattooing. The label 'butch' tattoo is usually used in cases where the tattoos are viewed as atypical for a woman (ie. the 'masculine' tattooing that many women in chapter one experienced as powerful and resistant tattooing). Alternatively the interviewees provided little distinction between 'sexy' tattooing and 'slutty' tattooing, suggesting that a woman's tattoo could be interpreted as one or the other primarily on the basis of whether the tattoo is being valued or critiqued. 'Sexy' tattooing is a label that is usually applied to more traditionally 'feminine' tattoos placed in concealable locations (and thus understood to be the negotiated form of female tattooing). However 'sexy' tattoos were often discussed within a framework of social risk, for 'sexy' tattoos can also easily be interpreted as having crossed a line, thus becoming 'slutty' tattoos.

The discussion of 'sexy' and 'slutty' tattoos raises the issue of the discrepancy between the *intended* meanings behind tattoos and the *interpreted* meanings ascribed to them by others. The discussion also pointed out how the meanings of particular tattoos are constructed, and can change over time. A powerful 'masculine' tattoo that is acquired by a woman as a means of displaying resistance, and as a challenge to conventional gender codes, can be labeled as 'butch' – a label that is often experienced as a social critique by many young heterosexual women. Likewise the acquisition of a tattoo that at one time might have been associated with empowerment – such as a tattoo on the breast – can in time come to be seen simply as 'slutty', a social critique that once again is experienced negatively by many young women.

The tramp stamp merited particular attention because of how frequently it was discussed by participants in the study. The data showed that while the lower back tattoo is often interpreted in relation to sexual agency (or the potential resistance that can be associated with sexual empowerment), it is also very clearly a heavily negotiated tattoo that is both 'feminine' and concealable. To this end many interviewees cited the lower back as a practical tattoo location in relation to traditional female roles, and it is clear that while the lower back tattoo is often interpreted as a 'sexy' or 'slutty' tattoo, many women choose this location as the logical result of a process of elimination, wherein almost all other tattoos are deemed to be inappropriate or impractical on the basis of lifelong traditional considerations relating to marriage, motherhood and aging. The placement of the tattoo thus reflects a keen understanding of the social context within which

women are operating, for while it allows women to express sexual empowerment when they wish to do so, the location also allows women to conceal their tattoo when there is a perceived risk to social status (such as in the context of traditional feminine statuses, or even within the context of special events and family occasions as discussed in Chapter One). In this sense, the lower back tattoo can be understood as the metaphorical walking of the tight-rope for young women, an engagement in both the resistance associated with sexual empowerment and the negotiation associated with actively decreasing the social risk of one's tattoo.

The lower back tattoo also serves as an interesting example of the ways in which tattoo meanings can change resulting in greater or less devaluation. Following its initial popularity as a practical tattoo location for women with the potential to communicate a sense of sexual empowerment, the lower back tattoo has undergone a shift in meaning wherein what was at first envisioned as a heavily negotiated display of 'sexy' is now broadly interpreted within a framework of 'slutty' and 'meaninglessness' tattooing – interpretations that bring about a loss of respect for the tattooee. Tattooees are assumed to be *aware* of what their tattoos will signify when they acquire them, and so they are held culpable for the ways in which their tattoos are socially 'read'. Thus many young women may have acquired tattoos that they expected to be interpreted as 'sexy', only to have those tattoos reinterpreted as indicators of sexual availability and vacuousness. The references to sexual agency thus serve as a legitimacy discourse for the devaluing that is associated with the label *tramp stamp*, suggesting that women *deserve* to be interpreted negatively on the basis of their lower back tattoo because they have acquired the tattoo as an intentional means of presenting themselves as 'easy'.

As previously discussed, however, the belief that all young women actively choose the various connotations that accompany the *tramp stamp* is illogical when we consider the concept of shifting meaning - for if the meaning of a tattoo is constantly shifting, we can not accurately attribute current tattoo connotations entirely to a tattooee's conscious intent. I would argue that these shifts in meaning (as evident in the critique of ankle, breast, and lower back tattoos) serve to create a tattooing minefield for young women, where the acquisition of *any* tattoos may potentially risk negative reinterpretation over time. The sexual labels that are applied to female tattooing reflect this ongoing shift in tattoo meaning, where the newly attached labels serve as *critiques* of young women's tattoo selections. These critiques not only have an impact on the lives of women who already have the tattoos discussed, but also impact other women in their decisions on how to modify their bodies. As one young woman tellingly suggested "I want to get a back tattoo, but not there. I don't want the stigma of having a lower back tattoo" (*Katie, age 22*).

## **Conclusion**

In this final chapter I tie together the ideas and findings that I have discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis. First I provide a brief overview of the findings of the thesis. Then I map out what I consider to be the three overarching conclusions of the thesis, followed by a discussion of the implications of these conclusions specifically in relation to the social position of university aged women. In the next section I highlight the contributions of the thesis to the substantive bodies of literature that I identified in my introduction. Finally, I address the question of potential areas for future research on tattooing, as well as in relation to the body, labeling, and sexuality.

### **Summary**

One of the questions that this thesis initially sought to answer was what specific tattoos would be interpreted as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ on the female body, and how each of these tattoo interpretations could then be related to the concepts of negotiation and resistance in the selection of female tattoo projects. The literature on women’s tattooing discusses women’s tattoo selections within the framework of negotiation and resistance, with women choosing to either conform to or defy the expectations associated with appropriate female tattooing. The literature also suggests that women’s choices have consequences for how they will be viewed (Atkinson 2002, Pitts 2003, Pitts 2005). I was interested in finding out which specific tattoo selections fit into each category.

For the women in this study, ‘appropriate’ tattoos or tattoos that at least allowed for the possibility to negotiate an acceptable identity included tattoos that were small, concealable, had a ‘feminine’ theme and were located on the back of the shoulder, the hips, the lower back or the ankles. Alternatively, ‘inappropriate’ tattoos or tattoos that signaled resistance to traditional images of women included tattoos that were large, visible or less concealable, as well as masculine themed tattoos that are located elsewhere on the body.

When women engage in tattooing, their tattoos invariably come to be defined as either appropriate or inappropriate, negotiated or resistant, by those who view their bodies. Each category elicits a different reaction, and as the data demonstrates, often these reactions to female tattoos take the form of *sexual interpretations*. This leads to another of the central questions that I identified early in this thesis: what are some of the key ways in which female tattooed bodies are interpreted by others? The data shows that sexual interpretations of female tattooing include the categories of ‘butch’ tattooing, ‘sexy’ tattooing and ‘slutty’ tattooing. In addition, there is the category of the ‘meaningless’ tattoo, a label that also often ties in with the sexual interpretations of women’s tattoos because it is a label that is sometimes used to refer to tattoos on women that are also understood to be ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’.

These sexual interpretations are an important aspect of understanding female tattooing. While from the perspective of the women who make the decision to get certain tattoos these tattoos can be experienced as empowering, how the tattoos are interpreted by others and the implicit negative judgments inherent in these interpretations can serve to undermine the legitimacy of many tattoo selections for women. This is the case with tattoos that fall into the category of the *tramp stamp*. The *tramp stamp* was discussed at length in Chapter Two in the hopes of teasing out some of the central assumptions that underlie the sexual interpretations of women’s tattoos. What the data on the *tramp stamp* reveals is that while specific tattoos on women may be interpreted within the context of sexual agency (and often in a distinctly negative light), many women provide alternative and more practical reasons for these tattoo selections. Indeed, many women experienced the term *tramp stamp* as a label that has developed over time as a way of critiquing the most practical, as well as the most popular tattoo that is available to them.

## Conclusions and Implications

There are three overarching conclusions that may be drawn from my analysis. First, I argue that *tattoo meanings are not static across bodies*. The second conclusion, and related to the first, is that *tattoo meanings are not static across time*. And the third, and perhaps most important conclusion of this thesis, is that these shifts in tattoo meaning do not fall out of the sky, but rather they *act*



*to socially control women and to maintain gender relations specifically in relation to women's symbolic expressions of power.*

The first conclusion, that *tattoo meanings are not static across bodies*, is perhaps one of the most fundamental ways in which we must understand tattoo interpretations. I would argue that the ways in which a tattoo is interpreted can vary widely from one body to the next. The bicep tattoo, for example, is likely to be interpreted very differently depending on whether it is located on the body of a man or a woman. It is clear that as a means of influencing whether a woman's tattoo might be interpreted as appropriate or inappropriate, female tattooing is an activity that is bound by certain rules – and that these rules are significant due to their marked difference from the rules that surround male tattooing.

Furthermore, *tattoo meanings are also not static across time*. The fluidity of tattoo meanings over time is most clearly reflected in the ways in which many female tattooees have experienced a shift in how their tattoos are interpreted by others over both long and sometimes very short periods of time. The lower back tattoo specifically is a good case in point. For women this possibility for a shift in meaning is an especially important concern when it comes to selecting an 'appropriate' tattoo because many of the central rules that bind female tattooing, and in turn influence women's tattoo decisions, are thus experienced as *contradictory in nature and constantly changing*. In determining what tattoo selections are considered to be inappropriate for women, and why, it became clear that while the tattoos most commonly associated with masculinity and gender resistance were the ones that were the most likely to elicit negative judgments, this was not a concrete rule. Rather almost *any* tattoo (including the comparatively more appropriate 'feminine' tattoos and 'sexy' tattoos) *could potentially undergo a shift in meaning towards a negative critique* such that what was once generally seen as "acceptable" might come to be seen as "meaningless" or "butch." This highlights the fluid and often contradictory nature of female tattooing rules. Even when women attempt to act within the rules and acquire tattoos that will be viewed as appropriate, the meanings of their tattoos have the potential to become reappropriated over time in a way that implies that they are, after all, 'inappropriate' tattoo selections. This creates a body modification minefield for women; for they can never know how their tattoo meanings might change, making any tattoo the possible source of social risk.

If it can be said, then, that the tattooing 'rules' can not serve a legitimate practical purpose for women in selecting their tattoos due to the way in which the tattoo meanings shift, to what purpose are women bound within these tattooing rules? This leads us to the third, and perhaps most important conclusion of this thesis. I would argue that the shifting meanings of tattoos, reflected perhaps best in the case of the *tramp stamp*, not only highlight the contradictory nature of the rules around female tattooing but also provide insight into the important *function* that these types of body modification rules serve in our society – as a means of ideologically maintaining gender roles. Chafetz (1990) suggests that there are many means by which women may be coerced into conforming to a traditionally

submissive gender role. Likewise, many other academics suggest that the ways in which women are expected to modify their bodies can reflect the ways in which they are being ideologically coerced into the role of passive femininity (Faludi 1991, Findlay 1996, Wolf 2002). I would argue that the rules around female tattooing reflect this kind of ideological coercion. This is clear in the extent to which women are clearly steered towards displaying passive *femininity* in their tattoo selections, in the social risks that are associated with the acquisition of gender resistant tattooing for young women, and finally in the contradictory ways in which even ‘appropriate’ tattoos can become ‘inappropriate’.

While it is true that *both* men and women are encouraged to use tattooing as a means of displaying traditional gender roles, and it is also true that both men and women experience shifts in the meaning of their tattoos, it is the relationship of men and women’s ‘appropriate’ tattoo selections to the *symbolic expression of power* that is perhaps the key to understanding why shifting meaning is so important to women’s experiences of tattooing. Ideological coercion is closely tied up with notions of power, something that is often expressed through both male and female tattoos. We can understand this by considering the ways in which men and women’s ‘appropriate’ tattoos differ in relation to power. The data from this study indicates that while men are expected to perform masculinity through their tattoo projects (and that this masculinity is displayed through the use of tattooing that is interpreted as powerful), women are alternatively expected to perform femininity through their tattooing by a *distancing* from this display of power. If we follow this correlation through to its logical conclusion, it is clear that while men are *empowered* through the ways in which their tattoos become interpreted as ‘appropriate’, women are instead *disempowered*. This is most evident in the ways in which *powerful* tattooing for women - both ‘masculine’ and ‘sexy’ - are often reinterpreted as ‘butch’ or ‘slutty’, labels that then discourage many women from making these tattoo selections. Shifting meaning, then, operates as a means of disempowering women’s tattoo selections, for the data shows that when women select powerful/resistant tattoos (instead of choosing negotiated tattoos) their tattoos often undergo a shift in meaning over time such that the statement that they wanted to make becomes neutralized and their tattoos instead become reinterpreted in ways that the women experience as negative. In fact, one could argue that the dialogues on ‘appropriate’ female tattooing very clearly suggest that women should present themselves as powerless, and that to do otherwise might potentially incite serious social retribution.

In her research on attitudes towards tattooing Hawkes suggested that “women with tattoos were viewed as more powerful and less passive than women without tattoos” (Hawkes 602). Likewise, others (DeMello 1993, Fisher 2002, Halnon 2006) have indicated that the decision to become tattooed can and should be interpreted within a framework of the symbolic power that is associated with choosing to tattoo one’s own body. The interviewees in my research revealed that power *is* the key to how both men and women’s tattoos are interpreted. Further, they revealed that there are certain tattoo projects that are both viewed and

experienced as more powerful than others, and that *for women, 'powerful' tattoo projects are the ones that are the most likely to become labeled negatively*. Some of these labels, such as the *tramp stamp*, support the argument that promiscuity discourses are used as a means of discouraging women from seeking empowerment (Klesse 2005, Ritchie et al. 2006, Stein 2006). I would argue that many of the various labels that are applied to female tattooing (such as 'butch', 'slutty', and 'meaningless'), when experienced negatively by women, reflect an ideological backlash against female expressions of power more broadly speaking. In effect, the critiquing labels discussed in this thesis serve to remove the power from resistant, sexually empowered, and even negotiated tattooing, and distance women's tattoo projects from symbolic expressions of power more generally.

In this thesis I spent quite a bit of time discussing the notion of the *tramp stamp*, and I would like to return to this tattoo for just a moment as a means of further demonstrating how power is such an important factor in influencing the negative interpretations of women's tattoos. One might wonder, for example, whether the *tramp stamp* should be categorized as a resistant tattoo or a negotiated tattoo. Further, one might ask whether the sexualization that has most recently come to be connected with the *tramp stamp* label means that when women acquire such 'sexy' tattoos it can only ever reflect the exploitation of their bodies? Can women who acquire the *tramp stamp* and other forms of 'sexy' tattooing be understood as portraying reclaimed and powerful bodies as well? I would argue that the answer can be both, and that the contentious relationship between the lower back tattoo and the display of power helps to explain why this tattoo is the most practical and popular tattoo for women, while at the same time generating negative interpretations. The lower back tattoo has been revealed in the data to be a moderately resistant, sexually empowering tattoo for many women. At the same time, however, this tattoo is also very clearly a negotiated tattoo in terms of feminine imagery, small size, tattoo placement, and concealment. The lower back tattoo clearly shows the ways in which women's bodies can become exploited through the cultural reappropriation of meaning. At the same time it reflects the means by which women may choose to resist the rules that bind them, seeking empowerment in increasingly logical, if limited, ways. The relationship of the lower back tattoo to notions of power offers an example of how women are discouraged from presenting themselves as powerful through their tattoo projects. Through the constant risk of shifting meaning that moves to reinterpret powerful female tattoos in a negative light, women are compelled to present themselves as "powerless bodies" (Findlay, 1996). And while women may wish to, and indeed do, rebel against these expectations, there are social risks associated with such rebellion.

One might ask, what are the implications of this association between power and the negative interpretation of women's tattoos – indeed what are the implications of this research specifically for university aged women?

In their study on the ways in which undergraduate university students experience labeling and categorization by their peers, Lemay and Ashmore argue

that how young adults become categorized can significantly, and sometimes negatively, impact the development of the student's self identity (2004). Since many students experience the formation of a new identity during their transition to university life, negative categorizations and labels that are applied by their peers can act as a "categorization threat" (2004: 174) to this development. Depending on the self esteem of the individual as well as the extent to which they feel driven to belong, such categorizations may in turn lead to an "internalization effect" (2004:176), a situation that the authors argue is capable of "elicit[ing] changes in self-definition" (2004:181). Clearly then the types of labels that become attached to young adults during the formative years of their university experience can have a strong influence on how they feel about themselves and experience their own identity. If we draw on this notion as a part of our discussion on the labeling of women's tattoos, it becomes clear that for young university women, the labels that are associated with many tattoo selections (such as the *tramp stamp*) may influence the sense of self that tattooed women develop during their university years. Given the disempowerment that is associated with many of these labels, the implications for the ways in which young university women may experience themselves as powerless becomes a serious concern.

The effect of negative interpretations of tattoos on female bodies may be felt not only by those who bear tattoos, but also by those who do not. The literature on female sexuality tells us that even when a label has not been directly applied to a young woman, as may be the case for a woman who does not yet have a tattoo, the very threat of a negative sexual label alone can still have an influence on her actions. This is what Klesse refers to as the "whore stigma" (Klesse 2005:449). So not only do tattoo labels have implications for the women who are already tattooed, but they also have implications for all women who are exposed to these labels, regardless of their own tattoo status. The phrase *tramp stamp*, as well as the other sexual labels, reflect the ways in which the 'whore stigma' becomes a powerful means of asserting informal social control over women's bodies.

Finally, I feel that it is important at this stage to clarify that informal social control over the body is never really just about the body itself. In her discussion on the ways in which women's bodies serve as contested sites for gender and empowerment, Wolf argues that when women are encouraged to present themselves as powerless, so too are they being encouraged to *be* powerless (2002). If women cannot express power through the ways in which they represent themselves in terms of their bodily presentation of self, then by extension women are experiencing restrictions on power that can be transferred over to all other aspects of life. In thinking through the implications that tattoo labels may have for women, it seems clear that university women are being taught important lessons about their bodies, their identities and their claims on or relationships to power. In being told that they cannot modify their bodies in ways that they experience as powerful, university women (implicitly) learn that the expression of

power is dangerous terrain, and that they would do best to court power through less obvious and more negotiated means.

In conclusion, I would argue that while female tattooing can clearly be experienced as resistant and empowering by many women, the informal regulations that surround female tattooing (to the extent that they are different from male regulations, are contradictory in nature, and have the potential to shift precariously over time) suggests that women are heavily discouraged from using their tattoos as a way of expressing themselves as powerful. This speaks to the ways in which women are encouraged to present themselves as “powerless bodies” (Findlay, 1996) through their body modification practices, and is a cultural factor that can have a very tangible influence on the ways in which university aged women come to experience their bodies and their identities to be either powerful, or powerless.

## Contributions

In the introduction of this thesis I briefly discussed the differences between spectacular tattooing and mainstream tattooing, and identified the importance of an exploration of mainstream tattooing for women as one of the central goals of this thesis. While limited, then, this study has contributed to the extremely limited literature on mainstream tattoo practices among young adults, and among university students in particular. It has also provided an analysis of the ways in which these mainstream tattoo practices come to be interpreted by others, and some of the implications of these interpretations.

Another contribution of the thesis lies in the attention that it pays to shifting tattoo meanings. While some research has been done into the cultural appropriation of tattoo meaning, specifically relating to the ‘gentrification’ of tattooed bodies that serve to recreate tattooing as powerful and valued (Fleming 2000, Govenar 2000, DeMello 2000, Atkinson 2003, Halnon 2006), little research has been done into the opposite process. To my knowledge no previous research has focused on the ways in which tattoo meanings can become reappropriated *by people other than the tattooee* – and often outside of their control – as a means of critiquing or negatively portraying the tattoo selection. It is an important observation to make that in the same way that tattoo meaning can shift positively, allowing gentrified tattooed bodies to express power and value, tattoo meaning can also shift backwards, causing certain tattooed bodies to become *disempowered*. Given the permanency of tattoos and the kind of impact that shifts in meaning can have on the lives of tattooees, a clearer understanding of how the cultural appropriation of tattoo meaning can work is a significant contribution to the literature on tattooing – both in relation to female tattooing and female

expressions of power, as well as in relation to the potential links that this notion may have with other disempowered groups more broadly speaking.

A third contribution of the thesis lies in the analysis of the *tramp stamp* label as a mechanism for informal social control. No other study to date has focused on the *tramp stamp*, or on the current interpretations of ‘sexy’ and ‘slutty’ tattooing as broad sexual categorizations. Further, there have been few studies that have looked at the links between tattooing and attributions of promiscuity in relation to the themes of women’s presentation of self, women’s expressions of power, and women’s actual access to power. The sexualization of women’s tattoo projects is interesting in that it tells a story about not only women’s tattooing, but also about how women’s actions and expressions can become interpreted within a framework of sexuality. The display of ‘sexy’ tattooing can provide women with a very real sense of empowerment, as well as access to the social status that is associated with this positive attention. However, ‘sexy’ tattooing is a limited and indeed precarious source of status for women. While presenting oneself as sexually attractive may provide increased social mobility for individual women, it does not improve the position of women as a group (Weitz 2003), nor is it a *stable* means of accessing increased status, for there is always the potential for one’s ‘sexy’ representation of self to become reinterpreted as ‘slutty’. The movement of ‘sexy’ tattoo to ‘slutty’ tattoo reflects how struggles of power over the body become ideological – with women’s symbolic expressions of power generating a promiscuity backlash. While this is interesting data in relation to tattoos, I would suggest that this data goes beyond tattoos, and speaks to the ways in which promiscuity labels may play a key role in discouraging women from expressing themselves as powerful, or indeed, even from attempting to actually increase their social status in a more direct manner.

Finally, there is quite a bit of research on the relationship between tattooing and the symbolic expression of power over the body – both historically, in terms of expressing ownership over the body of another, and the more current version wherein tattooees are said to express ownership of one’s *own* body through the acquisition of tattoos. Many scholars have gone so far as to suggest that current tattooees have turned the relationship between tattoos and power onto its head, and that tattoos are now used as a means of establishing oneself as free from state regulation (DeMello 1993, Fisher 2002, Halnon 2006). The data from this study suggests that while women may use tattooing as a similar expression of resistance along these lines (and indeed female bodies may be considered to be the heavily regulated bodies that Fisher refers to, given the current controversy around fetal rights and abortion laws), this expression of resistance is mediated and perhaps even neutralized in the case of women through the cultural reappropriation of tattoo meaning. To use the same metaphor, the relationship between tattooing and power is being turned back on its head, this time against women. While women may use tattoos to express resistance, the meanings their tattoos are given are used to regulate them. This suggests that attitudes towards different styles of tattoos may be tied in with power on many levels, and that these

attitudes may serve as an ideological means of maintaining the status quo – not just in relation to the position of women, but also relating to the political position of various other groups in society as well. These are notions that have not been widely discussed in the literature on tattooing. This thesis has the possibility, then, of generating more thinking about the relationship between tattooing and power on a broad level.

### **Future Research**

Due to the limited scope of this project, there are many dimensions of tattooing that I was not able to sufficiently explore in this thesis. The following section seeks to identify several of these areas and to suggest that they may be valuable topics for future research for those who are interested in the ways in which tattoo practices are both experienced and interpreted.

While this thesis has focused on the ways in which tattoo meanings may shift across bodies and time, tattoo meanings may also shift from situation to situation – and can thus be understood as contextual. Consider the following scenario: A young woman might experience her tattoo as a symbol of ‘rebelliousness’ or as an assertion of ‘independence’ when she encounters disapproving parents or grandparents who reflect the views of an older and more conservative generation. However later that same day, the same tattoo might come to mean ‘belonging’ or ‘group membership’ when she interacts with certain groups of her peers. The extent to which tattoo meanings are contextual has not been sufficiently explored in this thesis, and would be a valuable question to explore in relation to how people may experience their tattoos.

Another aspect of tattooing that came up in the thesis and deserves more attention has to do with the differences in interpretations across generations. There are a few studies that have touched on the notion of generationality (Atkinson 2003, Sanders 1989) as it relates to tattoos. However, more attention needs to be paid to precisely how generational perspectives on tattooing translate interactionally in the encounters between those who have tattoos and those who react to them.

A third area for future research is the extent to which many of the tattoo meanings discussed in this thesis are experienced by non-university students. As a logistic limitation of the methodology, I only conducted the interviewing and surveying from within a population of university students. In a variety of ways, however, university students may be different from a non-student population. While university life may provide important formative experiences for many individuals, I acknowledge that there are many tattooed individuals outside of university life to whom this research may not speak. Further research into women’s tattoo labels in a non-student population would be a useful step towards determining just how generalizable the findings in this study are.

A fourth area of research suggested by the findings of this study is a more focused analysis on lesbian experiences of tattooing. Of the 18 women that I interviewed, only one participant self identified as a lesbian who has tattoos. This posed a limitation on my discussion of ‘butch’ tattooing. I was able to discuss the ‘butch’ label from the standpoint of others, focusing on how those outside the queer community apply these labels and how heterosexual women experience them in relation to their own tattoo selections. However, I was not able to discuss the label extensively in terms of how lesbian women respond to these attributions, as well as in relation to the empowerment that this label might provide for lesbian women who choose to become tattooed. Further research into the ‘butch’ label as it is experienced by lesbians, as well as a more broad discussion of lesbian experiences of tattooing, is needed.

A final area in which this thesis has raised questions that I have not been able to sufficiently explore is in the realm of male tattooing. While much has been written about tattooing among men, very little research has been done that looks specifically at notions of male sexuality displayed through tattoo selections. Is there the male equivalent of ‘sexy’ female tattooing? If so, what are the differences and the similarities in men and women’s ‘sexy’ tattoos? A comparison of ‘sexy’ tattoos on male and female bodies may lead to a fuller understanding of hetero-normativity and body modification practices among both women and men, and indeed might also shed some light into how notions of power are implicated in our understandings of ‘sexy’ tattooing on male and female bodies.

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## Appendix A

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## Appendix B

<b>McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)</b> <small>c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH-305/H, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca</small> <b>CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH</b>			
<b>Application Status:</b> New <input type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number 2007 013			
<b>TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:</b> Tatting and the Looking Glass Self: Body Modification as a Gendered Battleground			
<b>Name(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
<b>Faculty Investigator(s)/ Supervisor(s)</b>			
D. Pawluch	Sociology	23618	pawluch@mcmaster.ca
<b>Student Investigator(s)</b>			
A. Ellerbrok	Sociology	905-527-0171	ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca
The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification. <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification. <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:			
<b>COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.</b>			
<b>Reporting Frequency:</b>		Annual: Mar-18-2008	Other:
Date: Mar-18-2007		Dr. D. Maurer, Chair/ Dr. D. Pawluch, Vice-chair:	
Sept. 7, 2007		<i>Stephane Maurer</i>	



# Do **YOU** Have a Tattoo???

**If so, I want to talk to you!  
Regardless of how you feel about  
your tattoo(s), I want to hear what  
you have to say about your body  
art experience!**

**Research interviews will involve:**

- **Approximately a half hour to one hour time commitment (depending on how much you have to say);**
- **Questions about your own body art, the story behind your tattoo, how you feel about it, and how the people in your life have reacted to your body art (either negatively or positively), etc;**
- **And I also want to hear your opinion on body art in general!**

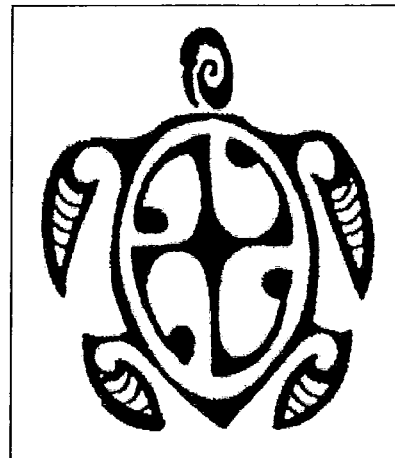
If you have any questions, or to take part in this study, please contact:

Ariane Ellerbrok  
[ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca)

or  
905-527-0171

**Thank you for your time!! 😊**

This study has received ethics approval  
From the McMaster Research Ethics Board



## Appendix D



February 2007

### Tattooing Interview – Letter of Information

**Principal Investigator:** Ariane Amber Ellerbrok  
Department of Sociology, McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
[ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca)

**Advisor:** Dorothy Pawluch  
Department of Sociology, McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
[pawluch@mcmaster.ca](mailto:pawluch@mcmaster.ca)

**Research Sponsor:** Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this study is to explore attitudes towards tattooing in relation to gendered bodies, as well as to learn about body modification practices at McMaster University. The data collected in this research will contribute towards a Masters thesis in Sociology.

#### **Procedures involved in the Research**

You will be asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. You will be asked questions about your tattoos, why you chose them, how you feel about them, and how the people in your life have reacted to your decision to become tattooed. With your consent, this interview will be recorded to aid in the data collection process.

#### **Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

It is not likely that you will find any of the questions in this interview upsetting, however some questions will be of a personal nature and may be unsettling in the event that you have experienced negative reactions towards tattoo art. If there are any questions that make you uncomfortable you may choose to not answer them, or to discontinue with the interview.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential in this study. Your name will not be written on the recorded tape, nor will it be used in the written version of this study. Anything you say in this interview will be maintained in the strictest of confidence.

#### **Participation:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can change your mind about participating at any time. If at any point during the interview you decide that you do not wish to continue, you may withdraw from the study without consequence. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.



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**Information About the Study Results:**

If you are interested in the results of this study, please send an email to [ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca) any time after August of 2007. The data from this study may be used again in future research regarding body modification practices.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Office of Research Services  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

**Concerns :**

Other additional contacts in the event that you find any of the questions in this interview upsetting include :

McMaster Crisis Centre  
Location: McMaster University, MUSC B-107  
Phone: (905) 525-9140 Ext. 24711

Distress Centre of Hamilton  
Phone: (905) 525-8611

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**CONSENT**

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Ariane Amber Ellerbrok, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, if I choose to do so. I agree to participate in this study, and I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Participant

In my opinion, the person who has signed above is agreeing to participate in this study voluntarily, and understands the nature of the study and the consequences of participation in it.

---

Signature of Researcher or Witness

## Appendix E

### Tattooed Interview Participants

#### Semi-Structured Interview Schedule – Tattooing

Start taping (with permission).

Explain the informed consent form, voluntary involvement, and confidentiality.

Both interviewer and interviewee sign form.

#### Questions:

1. Demographic info (sex, age, occupation, etc.)
2. Do you have a tattoo? (logistics: how many, location, size, etc.) How long have you had your tattoo?
3. Is there a story behind your tattoo? What does your tattoo mean to you?
4. Why did you choose that particular tattoo size/location?
5. Do you consider your tattoo to be either masculine or feminine? What is masculine/feminine/neutral about your tattoo?
6. Is there any particular event or exposure that has strongly impacted your attitude towards tattooing?
7. How have your friends reacted to your tattoo(s)?
  - Family members?
  - Your significant other if applicable (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)
  - Strangers?
  - Co-workers or employers?
8. Do you choose to hide/show your tattoo(s)? On what occasions?
9. How have the reactions of the people in your life impacted how you see your tattoo(s)?
10. Has this changed how you see yourself?

11. Do you regret your tattoo(s)? Would you do it again? Why/why not?
12. How old were you when you had your (first) tattoo done?
13. Before you had your (first) tattoo done, did anyone try to discourage you? What did they say?
14. What do you think are some common reasons why some people choose not to become tattooed?
15. Do you think that men and women get different tattoos? If so, how are the tattoos different?
16. What tattoos do *you* think are more appropriate for men? More appropriate for women?
17. Do you think there are particular characteristics that are common to people who choose to become tattooed?
18. When you see a man with a tattoo, do you think he is more likely to be aggressive? Why/why not?
  - Do you think he's more likely to sleep around? Why/why not?
  - Do you think he is more likely to be of a "higher class" or a "lower class"? Why/why not?
19. When you see a woman with a tattoo, do you think she is more likely to be aggressive? Why/why not?
  - Do you think she's more likely to sleep around? Why/why not?
  - Do you think she is more likely to be of a "higher class" or a "lower class"? Why/why not?
20. *Probes*: What kinds/sizes/locations of tattoos would make you think that a man/woman is more likely to be aggressive/promiscuous/"lower class"?
21. Have you seen any particular tattoo style that you really *like*? What do you like about it?
22. Have you seen any particular tattoo style that you really *dislike*? What do you dislike about it?
23. Do you think tattooing is safe? What would you characterize, if any, as the dangers of tattooing?

24. Have any of your family members/friends tried to tell you that it's not safe? What did they tell you? How did this impact your feelings about tattooing?
25. What do you think that other people (in general) think about tattooing?
26. Why do you think 'they' feel this way?
27. How do you see tattoos represented on television? How does this make you feel?
28. Will you get another tattoo? What will it be of?
29. What do you think is the most important thing people should consider when getting a tattoo?
30. What do you like best about the practice of tattooing? And least?
31. How would you characterize your financial expenditure on tattooing?
32. Are there any other forms of body modification that you are engaged in? (Ear piercings, ear lobe stretching, body piercings, embedded tattoos, scarification, cosmetic surgery, etc.)
33. Is there anything else you would like to add????

## Appendix F

### Non-tattooed Interview Participants

#### Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Start taping (with permission).

Explain the informed consent form, voluntary involvement, and confidentiality.

Both interviewer and interviewee sign forms, both keep a copy.

#### Questions:

1. Demographic info (sex, age, occupation, etc.)
2. Do you have a tattoo? Have you ever wanted a tattoo?
  - Probes: If they want one and think they'll get one: Tell me about the tattoo you would like to get (size, location, imagery, meaning, rated as feminine/neutral/masculine, when they'll get it, etc)
  - Probes: If they want one but likely won't get one: Can you tell me a bit about the reasons behind why you have decided not to get a tattoo?
  - Probes: If they don't want one at all: Can you expand on your feelings about tattooing and why you don't want one?
3. Is there any particular event or exposure that has strongly impacted your attitude towards tattooing?
4. How would your Family members react if you chose to get a tattoo?
  - Your significant other if applicable (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)
  - Friends?
  - Strangers?
  - Co-workers or employers?
5. How would you feel if your partner/close friend/family member chose to get a tattoo?
6. What do you think are some common reasons why some people choose not to become tattooed?
7. Has anyone ever directly tried to discourage you from choosing to become tattooed? What did they say?

8. Do you think that men and women get different tattoos? If so, how are the tattoos different?
9. What tattoos do *you* think are more appropriate for men? More appropriate for women? What tattoos are *socially viewed* as more appropriate for men or women?
10. Do you think there are particular characteristics that are common to people who choose to become tattooed? How do you feel about the tattooing of others in general?
11. When you see a man with a tattoo, do you think he is more likely to be aggressive? Why/why not? What imagery/locations/sizes of tattoos might make you feel this way?
  - Do you think he is more likely to be of a “higher class” or a “lower class”? Why/why not? What imagery/locations/sizes of tattoos might make you feel this way?
  - Are there any tattoos on the male body that have particular meaning?
12. When you see a woman with a tattoo, do you think she is more likely to be aggressive? Why/why not? What imagery/locations/sizes of tattoos might make you feel this way?
  - Do you think she is more likely to be of a “higher class” or a “lower class”? Why/why not? What imagery/locations/sizes might make you feel this way?
  - Are there any tattoos on the female body that have particular meaning?
13. Have you seen any particular tattoo style that you really *like*? What do you like about it?
14. Have you seen any particular tattoo style that you really *dislike*? What do you dislike about it?
15. Do you think tattooing is safe? What would you characterize, if any, as the dangers of tattooing?
16. Have any of your family members/friends tried to tell you that it’s not safe? What did they tell you? How did this impact your feelings about tattooing?
17. What do you think that other people (in general) think about tattooing? Why do you think ‘they’ feel this way?

- 
18. How do you see tattoos represented on television? How does this make you feel?
- How do you see tattoos represented in movies?
  - How do you see tattoos represented in newspaper articles?
19. What do you think is the most important thing people should consider when getting a tattoo?
20. Are there any other forms of body modification that you are engaged in? (Ear piercings, ear lobe stretching, body piercings, embedded tattoos, scarification, cosmetic surgery, etc.)
21. Is there anything else you would like to add about tattooing, anything I may have missed or something we didn't already cover????

**Appendix G**  
**Interviewee Name Index<sup>1</sup>**

Participant #	Name	Gender	Age	# of Tattoos	Student Status	Program
1	Amber	F	21	2	Grad	Cultural Studies
2	Aimee	F	23	2	Grad	Cultural Studies
3	Jan	F	23	3 (LB) <sup>2</sup>	Undergrad	Anthropology
4	Jenna	F	27	1	Grad	Occupational Therapy
5	Ryan	M	23	1	Undergrad	Commerce
6	Evan	M	27	4 (spec) <sup>3</sup>	Grad	Labor Studies
7	Mike	M	26	8 (spec)	Undergrad	Sociology
8	Marianne	F	36	2	Grad	Social Sciences
9	Dana	F	19	2	Undergrad	Health Sciences
10	Lindsay	F	21	1 (LB)	Undergrad	Linguistics
11	Danena	F	19	2 (LB)	Undergrad	Engineering
12	Angie	F	28	2	Undergrad	Anthropology
13	Derrick	M	32	1	Grad	Social Sciences
14	Doug	M	22	4 (spec)	Undergrad	Economics
15	Kim	F	21	2 (LB)	Undergrad	Commerce
16a	Meg	F	21	1	Undergrad	Life Sciences
16b	Katie	F	22	1	Undergrad	Life Sciences
17	Ashley	F	21	3 (LB)	Undergrad	Humanities
18	Scott	M	26	2	Grad	Computer Sciences
19	Andrew	M	21	1	Undergrad	Comp Literature
20	Joseph	M	28	5 (spec)	Grad	History
21	Al	M	50	4	Undergrad	Geography
22	Tracy	F	25	2 (LB)	Grad	Occupational Therapy
23	Beth	F	21	0	Undergrad	Earth Sciences
24	Mick	M	20	0	Undergrad	Economics
25	Anne	F	25	0	Undergrad	Sociology
26	Greg	M	23	0	Undergrad	Software Engineering
27	Ritchie	M	21	0	Undergrad	Engineering & Physics
28	Jess	F	21	3 (LB)	Undergrad	Geography
29	Amanda	F	23	0	Grad	Archaeology
30	Dan	M	28	0	Grad	Anthropology
31	Matt	M	21	0	Undergrad	Economics

<sup>1</sup> Please note that all names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of interview participants.

<sup>2</sup> LB refers to lower back tattoo.

<sup>3</sup> Spec refers to "spectacular" tattooee.



## Appendix H

### Transcript Excerpts – Personal Tattoo Stories

#### **Evan's Story** (Tattoo of a star on each elbow)

Evan: I first got stars on each arm, like I said before it's from *the Outsiders*, it's from a poem based on Robert Frost. It says stay gold. It was part of the poem, and what it means is when you're young, springtime, everything is golden and fresh and new. It's almost a promise to myself to always be a child at heart, I never want to grow up to be old and bitter, a grumpy old man.

Researcher: When did that movie come out?

Evan: The book was written in the 60s or 70s by S.E. Hinton

Researcher: Something you read when you were a kid?

Evan: Yeah I had to read it in grade 7 for a school project.

Researcher: So do you identify that [poem] with your childhood? Like, that's who you were as a kid and that's who you always want to be? Is that what you mean when you say you always want to be young at heart?

Evan: No, I just don't want to grow up and be like, I always want to be young at heart. Not to be cheesy and cliché about it, but I don't want to be like the typical adult, I always want to be a kid, I always want to have fun, I don't want to be old and grumpy and cynical.

#### **Dana's Story** (Tattoo of a Selena Lily flower and a baby footprint on each hip)

Dana: [The tattoos are of a] Selena Lily, day lilies. And my little sister's footprint. She was born last July.... that's the flower she's named after, and we had a bunch of them in bloom right when we got her home from the hospital. They were in bloom. And so, I took a picture of the flower in bloom, and took her footprints from, I believe last summer, so she was just about a year old.

Researcher: So what does the tattoo mean to you, like why do you think you chose that symbol?

Dana: Uhh, well I know a lot of people just get mom and dad tattoos, and stuff like that. And she was, well, me and her are only siblings. And well, she wasn't planned, but she was kind of planned. My dad, well it's my step-dad, my parents had been trying for like five years, and then they were like oh well it's not going to happen, no need to put the precautions back in place! They're like under forty though.

Researcher: Oh okay, so they had been planning it for awhile and then just gave up?

Dana: Yeah they just gave up, and then like two years later my mom was like, I'm pregnant. And I was like shut up, what? Say what now? It just completely changed the family dynamic, it changed everything, like for the better. It changed everything completely for the better. It solidified the entire family, I'd say... Well, it was pretty darn solid before, they've been married, oh god I can't add, they got married when I was ten. No. They got together when I was ten, they got married when I was in grade eight. We always just thought it was like, it just seemed like, it was like you didn't know something was missing until you got it, kind of thing? And I know he [my step-dad] only has one sister, and she's like 400 lbs, so she can't conceive. And now she's not [400 lbs] but, and she's not going to have kids. And my step-dad's parents, they never had grandkids. Like they treat me like their grandkid, but never a baby. So they'd never experienced it, so it was really great. And none of us, like my dad had never touched a baby until he held my little sister, and I'd never touched a baby until I held my little sister. You know, so it was all really really new, so.

Researcher: So it's a big deal to everybody!

Dana: Yeah, everybody. We're obsessed. She has her own webpage. And I'm not kidding. He made her a webpage. He took over our domain.

### **Kim's Story (Tattoo of the letters 'Solo' on her ribs)**

Kim: [O]ne of my horses was killed.... [H]e was hit right in the side of his ribs, by a car. And so I got his name. He died instantly, the farm owners heard it from the house. And then they went down, it had to have been under 3 minutes, 4 minutes, and he was already dead. He didn't suffer. It was just so cold that there wasn't any blood or anything. So I got his name tattooed on me, right where he was hit. And his name is solo... I just wanted a way to remember him, and they, my parents have no idea... I mean I'd been thinking about getting something

done, and just a couple of close friends knew that I was thinking, I was getting to the point where I felt that I was ready to have the closure on that... But having stuff on your ribs hurts so much, and I did not feel a thing. I think I was just in a zone maybe, I was thinking of him. I had a little photo of him while I got it done.

Researcher: Nice so that really is closure, it's like a grieving process

Kim: yeah it definitely was, it was so sudden. It's not like he was sick and I got to say goodbye. When I got to say goodbye when the company picked him up he was already dead. And I felt like I did something wrong because two days before we changed his heel <meal?>, he was getting a different kind of food. I couldn't have done anything to stop it, I mean I couldn't have I was at home. And it [the tattoo] helped me just like closure. I still think about him.

### **Meg's Story**

#### **(Tattoo of a bat inside of a circular black design on her calf)**

Researcher: okay so what made you choose that image?

Meg: well I always wanted a tattoo of a bat, from the time I was 14. And umm, yeah, it was just a matter of finding the right image. The thing that I really really liked. Because if I just got anything, it just incorporates the pictures right. I always wanted a picture of a bat for two reasons. I've always had a kind of unnatural obsession with batman, because I'm an idiot <laughs> since I was 8 I had the poster and I would just admire it. I love you batman! <laughs> but also that's my favorite animal. And I'm a biologist. And I'm a big animal lover, I'm a big pet person. I've always been into science and stuff. So I wanted something, I always liked the aesthetic of the bat, and I always liked the mythology of batman, and I also wanted to represent my love of animals, my love of biology, what I study and what I do. So I wanted to encompass all of that. And I actually want to get this made into a wrap around, with three other circles of a bee, a shark and an elephant. They are the rest of my roster of animals that I like. <laughs> And that would be my biology tattoo. But also I wanted something that wasn't obviously speaking to that, dna or you know what I mean. I wanted it to be a little more subtle, and more, like why did you get that tattoo. I wanted it to be more of a conversation piece. It's not oh she must definitely be a biologist. And also really like, part of why I love the batman mythology and stuff, I really like how dark it is, the gothic art, and I feel that translates really well into a tattoo. I also want to get a tree with bats flying around it on my back, that's going to be my graduation present to myself. I'm pretty excited about that one actually...

Researcher: Do do you feel that it [your tattoo] represents your identity?

Meg: I do. Even though it's just a tattoo, just a thing. but it's on your skin and it's there for life. It should represent you in some way I think. And I guess it's just, I feel like it's stupid because a lot of it is to do with batman. And why would batman represent me? But it's a bit more meaningful than heroship. It's my admiration of the mythology and literature of it. And yeah, so it's a little bit more intimate than just being a superhero.

### **Scott's Story**

#### **(Tattoo of maple leaves blowing in the wind on his collarbone)**

Scott: Yeah, it's like the wind, the leaves in the wind.... I went to the artist and I explained what I wanted, and I gave him some pictures. It represents, well, I am here in Canada. It is a very important stage in my life. Before I was independent, but I was very immature. And it was very nice when you realize you can do very nice things. For example when you are beginning to learn English. When you are beginning to see that you can communicate with people, it was a time in my life that I felt very confident. And also my masters, it was hard, and I did it. And now I know I can do it. And I was very happy again. I don't want one [a tattoo] just because I like it.

### **Andrew's Story**

#### **(Tattoo of two small fish on his wrist/forearm)**

Andrew: Umm I got it last December, I was doing a really crappy job telemarketing, but I had a bit more money than before. And I wanted to have a tattoo for awhile, but I was waiting for, I wanted to get something that was actually meaningful to me. Umm, yeah

Researcher: So it's on your right wrist

Andrew: Yeah, it's actually significant. I guess it kind of has two meanings. One its pieces, which is my star sign, and it's kind of something that I guess I half believe the whole star sign.

Researcher: What kind of fish?

Andrew: It's a generic fish. If they look like anything they kind of look like tuna. It's got no significance in terms of the fish. Just like, but yeah I dunno, for whatever reason I find that I fit the pieces type pretty well, and I guess the idea of

flowing or malleability is just like a way of life. You know. Umm, and also because I put it on my right hand cause it's my drawing hand, and it's kind of a symbol of me of having made a decision to dedicate a portion of my life towards drawing and making art. Yeah. Also because yeah the <mumble> study, I put it here where it's somewhere that I could cover it up I guess if need be, but also somewhere where it could potentially screw me over in terms of having a job because this is part of my commitment towards art, it's more gearing me towards. I dunno if that was, I dunno, I feel pretty good about that.

### **Tracy's Story**

**(Tattoo of a small blue star on her hip, the size of a nickel)**

Tracy: [My] friend had decided she wanted to get a tattoo. And did I want to go with her? And I got there and was like oh I want one too. But the design was picked a little more carefully this time, it wasn't just looking at the wall for what I wanted. Because she'd given me a few days notice this time. And part of it, my dad had died when I was 15, and one of my friends had written a poem in a magazine called *The Mckenzie Star*, and it was a metaphor, the star was my dad. And then my friend also she was getting a moon, so the star kind of like, you know, it kind of was able to fit into a few different meanings.

### **Jess's Stories**

**(Lower Back tattoo of a snowflake, Kanjii tattoo on her wrist, 'Faith' letters tattooed on her other wrist)**

Researcher: So you mentioned you have how many tattoos?

Jess: I have three right now, and soon it will be five

Researcher: Can you tell me a little about each of them?

Jess: This is my first one

Researcher: The small of your back, would you say maybe three inches?

Jess: yeah three or four. I got it on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. I went and I got it done, there's a lot of reasons. I'm born in January, I snowboarded for pretty much my entire life, it's so much fun. I snowboard and then one of my favorite memories of my grandfather was when we were up at my cottage, and we were sitting in this huge snowstorm, and we were just kind of hanging out with the snowfall around

us. It was pretty cool, kind of sentimental. The second one I got was this one... It says fearless in Chinese.

Researcher: Kanji?

Jess: Yes. And so it says fearless, and then it has my football number, which is 42 in the centre of it. So that's my thing, I got it because first of all playing football and stuff, I wanted my number on me. And my second one was my grandfather told me if you're fearless you can accomplish anything... And then my third one [tattoo] is on my left inside wrist. About 2 and a half inches long, three inches long. About an inch high. And it's "faith", I need to get it touched up, but I got that done... what had happened was I was assaulted here at McMaster on campus, so I ended up hurting two disks in my back, and having a serious concussion. So I went through, the neurologists and stuff. What had happened was it was really really serious. Like everything. And after I got out of it I was extremely depressed. I couldn't deal with a lot of stuff. And then one of my friends ended up passing away, she was really close with me. This happened this past year. And I ended up being admitted to the hospital for about two weeks. And when I came out the only thing that kept me going was faith. And I had faith that I was going to get better, it had to get better sort of thing. I didn't like the way everything was going and whatnot. So I ended up getting that as soon as I got out of the hospital in march, I got that one.

Researcher: So do you see that one as a tattoo that represents a difficult time in your life, you got thought it?

Jess: Pretty much yeah. Every time I look at it I remember everything I went through. I remember I just kept on going and basically I needed to take a leap of faith and trust that everything will work out.



You can take part in an online

## Tattooing Survey!!!

I want to hear what you have to say about the practice of tattooing. Even if you don't have any tattoos yourself, your input is important!

By taking part in this survey, you will also have a chance to win a \$100.00 gift certificate for Titles, the McMaster bookstore.

**Website link for tattooing survey:**

**[http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/sociology/people/grad\\_ellerbrok.cfm](http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/sociology/people/grad_ellerbrok.cfm)**

Your survey password is: **XY145L**

After you have filled out the survey, instructions will be provided on how to enter the contest for the \$100.00 gift certificate for Titles.

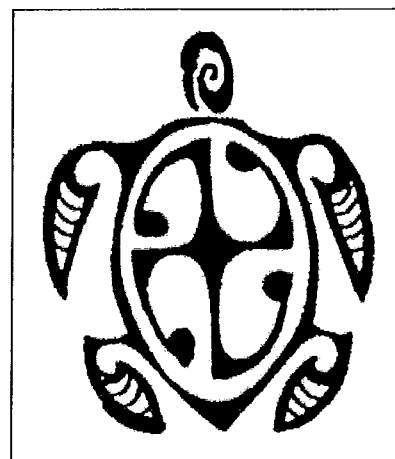
Thank you for your help, and good luck in the contest!

If you have any questions or difficulty accessing the website link please contact:

Ariane Ellerbrok  
[ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca)

**Thank you for your time!!** ☺

This study has received ethics approval  
From the McMaster Research Ethics Board



## Appendix J

Online Survey  
www.surveymonkey.com

### *Tattooing, Self and Other*

#### **1. To tattoo, or not to tattoo?**

Thank you for participating in my research on tattooing! In this survey I'm looking for your opinions on tattooing. So whether you have a tattoo or not, or whether you love them or hate them - I want to hear about what YOU have to say on the topic!

When you have finished the survey you will be redirected to a page that will allow you to enter a contest for a \$100.00 gift certificate to the McMaster bookstore.

I hope you enjoy the survey and good luck in the contest!

Image from: "1000 Tattoos"  
ed. Henk Schiffmacher, Taschen: 2005.





## Appendix J

### *Tattooing, Self and Other*

#### **2. Letter of Information & Consent**

Principal Investigator:  
Ariane Amber Ellerbrok  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
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Advisor:  
Dorothy Pawluch  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
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Research Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

#### Purpose of the Study:

The intent of this study is to explore attitudes towards tattooing in relation to gendered bodies, as well as to learn about body modification practices at McMaster University. The data collected in this research will contribute towards a Master's thesis in Sociology.

#### Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that you will find any of the questions in this survey upsetting, however some questions will be of a personal nature and may be unsettling in the event that you have experienced negative reactions towards your tattoo art. If there are any questions that make you uncomfortable you may either leave them blank or discontinue the survey.

#### Confidentiality:

Your identity will remain completely confidential. You will not be asked to reveal your name or email address in the survey.

#### Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can change your mind about participating at any time. If at any point during the survey you decide that you do not wish to continue, you may withdraw from the study without consequence.

#### Information About the Study Results:

If you are interested in the results of this study, please send an email to [ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ellerbaa@mcmaster.ca) any time after June of 2008. The data from this study may be used again in future research regarding body modification practices.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you

## **Tattooing, Self and Other**

have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Office of Research Services  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

Other additional contacts in the event that you find any of the questions in this survey upsetting include:

McMaster Crisis Centre  
Location: McMaster University, MUSC B-107  
Phone: (905) 525-9140 Ext. 24711

Distress Centre of Hamilton  
Phone: (905) 525-8611

### **CONSENT**

You may withdraw from the study at any time, if you choose to do so. By filling out this online survey you are indicating your consent to participate in this research. Please feel free to copy/paste this letter of information for your own records.

*Tattooing, Self and Other*

**3. And the survey begins...**

1. Do you have a tattoo?

Yes

No

## Tattooing, Self and Other

### 4. All about your tattoo(s)!

2. How many tattoos do you have?

3. How old were you when you had your first tattoo done?

4. Which of the following best describes your tattoo(s)?

Please check all that apply.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattooed foot                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> tattoo sleeve(s)                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattoo shirt                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> tattooed hands/knuckles              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on my stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> a full body suit of tattoos          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on my stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> other                                |

5. How would you rate your tattoo(s) in terms of its visibility (whether or not people can easily see it in day to day encounters)?

- Very visible
- Somewhat visible
- Somewhat hidden
- Very hidden

## Tattooing, Self and Other

6. How would you rate your tattoo(s) overall in terms of its masculinity/femininity?

- very feminine
- somewhat feminine
- neither feminine or masculine, neutral
- somewhat masculine
- very masculine

7. Overall, how have the people in your life reacted to your tattoo?

Please answer below by placing only one checkmark after each question:

	very positively	somewhat positively	neutral (neither positive or negative)	somewhat negatively	very negatively	they don't know about my tattoo	not applicable
How have your family members reacted to your tattoo(s)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How has your significant other reacted to your tattoo(s)? (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How have your friends reacted to your tattoo(s)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How have your co-workers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How have your employers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How have strangers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Tattooing, Self and Other

8. For which of the following events would you normally choose to hide your tattoo(s)?

Please check all that apply.

- at work
- at school
- when hanging out with friends
- at my wedding
- at family gatherings
- Other (please specify)

9. How do you feel about your tattoo(s)?

- I'm very happy with my tattoo(s)
- I'm somewhat happy with my tattoo(s)
- I'm neither happy/unhappy with my tattoo(s), neutral
- I'm somewhat unhappy with tattoo(s)
- I'm very unhappy with tattoo(s)

10. How would you characterize your financial expenditure on tattooing? (I have spent...)

- Nothing
- Approximately less than \$50 CDN
- Between \$50 - \$150 CDN
- Between \$150 - \$300 CDN
- Between \$300 - \$500 CDN
- Between \$500 - \$1000 CDN
- Over \$1000 CDN



## Tattooing, Self and Other

### 5. No tattoos? Fill me in!

11. Do you plan on getting a tattoo in the future?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Undecided
- Probably no
- Definitely no

12. Why don't you have a tattoo?

Please check all that apply.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Religious beliefs or values                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the disapproval of family                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of needles / pain                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the disapproval of friends                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about infection                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the disapproval of coworkers and/or employers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the spread of disease                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the reaction of strangers                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial cost                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Never really thought of it                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dislike the way they look                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Haven't found the "right" tattoo                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concern about the disapproval of a significant other | <input type="checkbox"/> Afraid I might change my mind later                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (please specify)                              |  |

13. How do you think that the people who are the closest to you would react if you chose to get a tattoo?

- very positively
- somewhat positively
- neither positive or negative, neutral
- somewhat negatively
- very negatively

6. How do you feel about other people's tattoos?

14. Please answer the following questions by checking ONLY ONE box for each of the following statements:

	I strongly approve	I somewhat approve	I'm unsure	I somewhat disapprove	I strongly disapprove
How do you feel about the practice of tattooing?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a man with one tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a man with several tattoos?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a woman with one tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a woman with several tattoos?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



## Tattooing, Self and Other

15. When you see a MAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that he will be:

- much more aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- a little more aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- the same as a man who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to aggression
- a little less aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- much less aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo

16. When you see a WOMAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that she will be:

- much more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- a little more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- the same as a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to aggression
- a little less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- much less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo

17. When you see a MAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that he will be:

- much more aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- a little more aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to aggression
- a little less aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- much less aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos

18. When you see a WOMAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that she will be:

- much more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- a little more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to aggression
- a little less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- much less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos

19. Do you have a close family member or friend who has a tattoo?

- Yes
- No

**7. Your experiences**

20. Have you ever had someone try to discourage you from getting a tattoo?

Yes

No

**8. Your experiences**

**21. Who has tried to discourage you from getting a tattoo?**

Please check all that apply.

- a family member
- a significant other (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)
- a friend
- a co-worker
- an employer
- a stranger
- Other (please specify)

**22. What did they tell you to try to discourage you?**

Please check all that apply.

- They said that tattooing hurts
- They said that tattooing is dangerous (infection)
- They said that tattooing is dangerous (disease)
- They said that I might change my mind (regret)
- They said that tattoos are not "nice" etc.
- They say that it might impact my ability to get a good job
- Other (please specify)

**9. Social attitudes towards tattooing...**

23. When you see a **WOMAN** with a **small/somewhat hidden tattoo**, you expect that she will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo
- a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo
- the same as a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo
- way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo

24. When you see a **MAN** with a **small/somewhat hidden tattoo**, you expect that he will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo
- a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo
- the same as a man who doesn't have a small tattoo with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo
- way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo

25. When you see a **WOMAN** with a **large/visually obvious tattoo**, you expect that she will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- the same as a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo
- way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo

26. When you see a **MAN** with a **large/visually obvious tattoo**, you expect that he will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- the same as a man who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo
- way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo

27. When you see a **woman** with **MULTIPLE tattoos**, you expect that she will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos

## Tattooing, Self and Other

28. When you see a man with MULTIPLE tattoos, you expect that he will be:

- much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to sexual activity
- a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos

You're almost done!!!!

## Tattooing, Self and Other

### 10. So what tattoos are okay for guys or girls?

For the following statements please check ALL of the answers that apply.

#### 29. I think it is appropriate for a MAN to have:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattooed foot                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> tattoo sleeve(s)                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattoo shirt                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> tattooed hands/knuckles               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on his stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> a full body suit of tattoos           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on his stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)           |  |

\_\_\_\_\_



## Tattooing Self and Others

30. I think it is appropriate for a WOMAN to have:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her upper arm  | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her hip/thigh area  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her forearm    | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her ankle/lower leg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her upper back | <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her neck            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattooed foot                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her lower back | <input type="checkbox"/> tattoo sleeve(s)                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> a tattoo shirt                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her chest      | <input type="checkbox"/> tattooed hands/knuckles               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a large tattoo on her stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> a full body suit of tattoos           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a small tattoo on her stomach    | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above                     |

Other (please specify)

31. When you see a MAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that he will be:

- of a much "higher class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- of a somewhat "higher class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to class
- of a somewhat "lower class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- of a much "lower class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos

32. When you see a WOMAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that she will be:

- of a much "higher class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- of a somewhat "higher class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to class
- of a somewhat "lower class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos
- of a much "lower class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos

### Tattooing: Self and Other

33. Please answer the following questions by checking ONLY ONE box for each of the following statements:

	I strongly approve	I somewhat approve	I'm unsure	I somewhat disapprove	I strongly disapprove
What is your response when you see a MAN with a butterfly tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a WOMAN with a butterfly tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a MAN with a skull & bones tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What is your response when you see a WOMAN with a skull & bones tattoo?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



## Tattooing: Self and Other

34. Would you date a person who has a tattoo?

- definitely yes
- somewhat yes
- undecided
- somewhat no
- definitely no

35. Would you date a person if he/she had an unconventional tattoo? (eg. a man with a butterfly tattoo or a woman with a skull and crossbones tattoo)

- definitely yes
- somewhat yes
- undecided
- somewhat no
- definitely no

36. Would you date a person if he/she had a body suit of tattoos? (eg. tattoos covering most of the body with very little skin showing)

- definitely yes
- somewhat yes
- undecided
- somewhat no
- definitely no

**11. What about sexy tattoos?**

37. Which of the following terms have you heard someone use when referring to a tattoo on a woman's lower back? (Please check all that apply)

- flirty
- sexy
- tramp stamp
- bullseye
- none of the above
- other

(please specify)

## Tattooing, Self and Other

12.

38. Where have you heard this term used? (Please check all that apply)

- at school
- at work
- at social gatherings with friends/peers
- from family
- on the internet
- on television
- in movies
- Other (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

39. Have any of your friends or acquaintances, to your knowledge, had their tattoo referred to as a tramp stamp, a bulls-eye, or another similar term?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Please only answer the next question (question #40) if you have a lower back tattoo. If you do not have a lower back tattoo, please skip this question and click next.

Thank you!

40. I have experienced having my lower back tattoo referred to as (Please check all that apply)

- flirty
- sexy
- a tramp stamp
- a bulls-eye
- none of the above
- other

(please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

13.

41. How did this experience impact you? (Please check all that apply)

- It made me feel sexy/attractive
- It didn't bother me at all
- I disregarded it
- I was offended
- I felt hurt
- It made me feel badly about my tattoo
- It made me feel badly about myself
- It made me regret my tattoo
- It made me feel angry towards the person who made the comment
- Other (please specify)

Only ONE MORE page!!!!!!!

**Tattooing, Self and Other**

**14. The last page I promise! (whew!)**

42. Are there any other forms of body modification that you are engaged in? Please check all that apply.

- Ear lobe piercing
- Ear piercing (other than lobe)
- Ear lobe stretching
- Other facial piercing
- Other body piercing
- Scarification
- Branding
- Embedded tattoos
- Cosmetic surgery
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

43. Sex:

- Male
- Female
- Intersex
- Transgender

44. Age:

- 17 - 25
- 26 - 35
- 36 - 45
- 46 - 55
- 56 - 65
- 66 +

## Tattooing, Self and Other

45. For this question please indicate the approximate combined family income for the household that YOU GREW UP IN. Please indicate the amount as close as you can to Canadian dollars.

- Less than \$10,000 a year
- Between \$11,000 and \$20,000 a year
- Between \$21,000 and \$30,000 a year
- Between \$31,000 and \$40,000 a year
- Between \$41,000 and \$50,000 a year
- Between \$51,000 and \$60,000 a year
- Between \$61,000 and \$70,000 a year
- Between \$71,000 and \$80,000 a year
- Between \$91,000 and \$99,000 a year
- Between \$99,000 and \$100,000 a year
- Between \$101,000 and \$120,000 a year
- Between \$120,000 and \$140,000 a year
- Over \$140,000 a year

46. How would you best describe your marital status?

- Single
- Long term relationship
- Common Law
- Married
- Separated, but still legally married
- Divorced
- Widowed

47. Please indicate your ethnic or cultural background:



**Tattooing, Self and Other**

48. Please indicate your religion:

- Roman Catholic
- Protestant
- Christian Orthodox
- Christian, not included elsewhere
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Sikh
- No religion
- Other (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

49. Please indicate which university faculty your program belongs to:

- Business
- Engineering
- Health Sciences
- Humanities
- Sciences
- Social sciences

50. Please indicate what year of your program you are currently studying in:

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th and above

51. What is the highest educational degree that you aspire to?

\_\_\_\_\_

52. Are there any other comments that you would like to add about tattooing?????

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation!!! :)

Please click 'done' in order to be redirected to the contest page.

## Appendix K

### Survey Monkey Incentive Form

#### Titles Contest

1. Enter for your chance to win a \$100.00 gift certificate from Titles & the MG.

Please note that the information that you provide here is not connected with the survey that you have just completed. Your survey responses will remain anonymous. Furthermore your personal information will not be shared with any third party, and will only be used to contact you in the event that you have won the contest

Contest draw date: November 30th 2007

\* 1. Name:

\* 2. Contact information of choice (either an email address or a phone number):

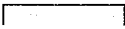
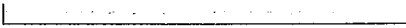
Thank you and good luck!!!



## Appendix L

### Survey Results

#### Tattooing, Self and Other

1. Do you have a tattoo?		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		22.9%	87
No		77.1%	228
<i>answered question</i>			293
<i>skipped question</i>			1

2. How many tattoos do you have?		Response Count
		83
<i>answered question</i>		68
<i>skipped question</i>		226

3. How old were you when you had your first tattoo done?		Response Count
		89
<i>answered question</i>		68
<i>skipped question</i>		226

4. Which of the following best describes your tattoo(s)? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a large tattoo on my upper arm <input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	3
a small tattoo on my upper arm <input type="checkbox"/>	7.4%	5
a large tattoo on my forearm <input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	3
a small tattoo on my forearm <input type="checkbox"/>	7.4%	5
a large tattoo on my upper back <input type="checkbox"/>	3.5%	3
a small tattoo on my upper back <input type="checkbox"/>	14.7%	10
a large tattoo on my lower back <input type="checkbox"/>	3.5%	3
a small tattoo on my lower back <input type="checkbox"/>	23.5%	13
a large tattoo on my chest <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
a small tattoo on my chest <input type="checkbox"/>	2.9%	2
a large tattoo on my stomach <input type="checkbox"/>	2.9%	2
a small tattoo on my stomach <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
a large tattoo on my hip/thigh area <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
a small tattoo on my hip/thigh area <input type="checkbox"/>	19.1%	13
a large tattoo on my ankle/lower leg <input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	4
a small tattoo on my ankle/lower leg <input type="checkbox"/>	10.3%	7
a large tattoo on my neck <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my neck <input type="checkbox"/>	7.4%	5
a tattooed foot <input type="checkbox"/>	2.9%	2
tattoo sleeve(s) <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
a tattoo shirt <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
tattooed hands/knuckles <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
a full body suit of tattoos <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
other <input type="checkbox"/>	13.2%	9
	answered question	68

5. How would you rate your tattoo(s) in terms of its visibility (whether or not people can easily see it in day to day encounters)?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Very visible	5.9%	4
Somewhat visible	16.2%	11
Somewhat hidden	39.7%	27
Very hidden	38.2%	26
	<i>answered question</i>	68
	<i>skipped question</i>	226

6. How would you rate your tattoo(s) overall in terms of its masculinity/femininity?

	Response Percent	Response Count
very feminine	19.1%	13
somewhat feminine	26.5%	18
neither feminine or masculine, neutral	38.2%	26
somewhat masculine	10.3%	7
very masculine	5.9%	4
	<i>answered question</i>	68
	<i>skipped question</i>	226

7. Overall, how have the people in your life reacted to your tattoo? Please answer below by placing only one checkmark after each question:

	very positively	somewhat positively	neutral (neither positive or negative)	somewhat negatively	very negatively	they don't know about my tattoo	not applicable	Resp Co
How have your family members reacted to your tattoo(s)?	11.9% (9)	30.9% (21)	18.2% (11)	25.0% (17)	4.4% (3)	11.9% (9)	0.0% (0)	
How has your significant other reacted to your tattoo(s)? (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)	39.7% (27)	20.8% (14)	18.2% (11)	4.4% (2)	1.5% (1)	3.0% (2)	17.6% (12)	
How have your friends reacted to your tattoo(s)?	57.4% (39)	32.4% (22)	10.3% (7)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	
How have your co-workers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	31.3% (21)	28.4% (19)	11.9% (8)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	10.4% (7)	17.6% (12)	
How have your employers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	5.9% (4)	11.8% (8)	27.9% (19)	1.5% (1)	0.0% (0)	26.0% (17)	27.9% (19)	
How have strangers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	23.9% (16)	29.9% (20)	19.4% (13)	4.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	14.9% (10)	7.6% (5)	
								answered question
								skipped question

8. For which of the following events would you normally choose to hide your tattoo(s)? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
at work <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	65.6%	42
at school <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	14.1%	9
when hanging out with friends <input type="checkbox"/>	4.7%	3
at my wedding <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	51.6%	33
at family gatherings <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	42.2%	27
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	18.8%	12
<i>answered question</i>		64
<i>skipped question</i>		230

9. How do you feel about your tattoo(s)?

	Response Percent	Response Count
I'm very happy with my tattoo(s) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	85.3%	53
I'm somewhat happy with my tattoo(s) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7.4%	5
I'm neither happy/unhappy with my tattoo(s), neutral <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
I'm somewhat unhappy with tattoo(s) <input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	3
I'm very unhappy with tattoo(s) <input type="checkbox"/>	1.5%	1
<i>answered question</i>		68
<i>skipped question</i>		226

10. How would you characterize your financial expenditure on tattooing? (I have spent...)

	Response Percent	Response Count
Nothing	1.5%	1
Approximately less than \$50 CDN	7.4%	5
Between \$50 - \$150 CDN	54.4%	37
Between \$150 - \$300 CDN	17.6%	12
Between \$300 - \$500 CDN	11.6%	3
Between \$500 - \$1000 CDN	5.9%	4
Over \$1000 CDN	1.5%	1
	<i>answered question</i>	68
	<i>skipped question</i>	226

11. Do you plan on getting a tattoo in the future?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Definitely yes	5.9%	13
Probably yes	17.6%	33
Undecided	23.9%	53
Probably no	27.5%	61
Definitely no	25.2%	60
	<i>answered question</i>	222
	<i>skipped question</i>	72

12. Why don't you have a tattoo? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Religious beliefs or values <input type="checkbox"/>	10.8%	24
Fear of needles / pain <input type="checkbox"/>	26.4%	83
Concern about infection <input type="checkbox"/>	23.0%	51
Concern about the spread of disease <input type="checkbox"/>	15.2%	35
Financial cost <input type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	39
Dislike the way they look <input type="checkbox"/>	27.5%	81
Concern about the disapproval of a significant other <input type="checkbox"/>	10.4%	23
Concern about the disapproval of family <input type="checkbox"/>	34.7%	77
Concern about the disapproval of friends <input type="checkbox"/>	3.3%	14
Concern about the disapproval of coworkers and/or employers <input type="checkbox"/>	16.0%	40
Concern about the reaction of strangers <input type="checkbox"/>	3.3%	14
Never really thought of it <input type="checkbox"/>	16.7%	37
Haven't found the "right" tattoo <input type="checkbox"/>	41.9%	93
Afraid I might change my mind later <input type="checkbox"/>	58.6%	130
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	12.2%	27
	<i>answered question</i>	222
	<i>skipped question</i>	72

13. How do you think that the people who are the closest to you would react if you chose to get a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
very positively	3.2%	7
somewhat positively	16.1%	40
neither positive or negative, neutral	35.7%	79
somewhat negatively	34.4%	75
very negatively	9.6%	19
<i>answered question</i>		221
<i>skipped question</i>		73

14. Please answer the following questions by checking ONLY ONE box for each of the following statements:

	I strongly approve	I somewhat approve	I'm unsure	I somewhat disapprove	I strongly disapprove	Response Count
How do you feel about the practice of tattooing?	29.4% (35)	39.4% (114)	21.1% (61)	9.0% (28)	1.0% (3)	289
What is your response when you see a man with one tattoo?	30.3% (38)	38.2% (110)	20.1% (52)	10.4% (30)	6.7% (2)	283
What is your response when you see a man with several tattoos?	18.4% (53)	20.8% (60)	19.4% (56)	29.9% (86)	11.5% (33)	288
What is your response when you see a woman with one tattoo?	29.5% (95)	38.5% (111)	19.4% (59)	11.5% (33)	1.0% (3)	289
What is your response when you see a woman with several tattoos?	18.3% (47)	21.2% (61)	16.7% (48)	29.1% (81)	17.7% (51)	283
<i>answered question</i>						289
<i>skipped question</i>						5



15. When you see a MAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that he will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	14.9%	43
a little more aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	48.4%	140
the same as a man who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to aggression	35.0%	104
a little less aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.7%	2
much less aggressive than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	289
	<i>skipped question</i>	5

16. When you see a WOMAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that she will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	15.3%	47
a little more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	47.8%	138
the same as a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to aggression	35.3%	102
a little less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.7%	2
much less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	289
	<i>skipped question</i>	5

17. When you see a MAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that he will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	35.6%	103
a little more aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	37.8%	103
the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to aggression	26.0%	75
a little less aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.3%	1
much less aggressive than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	288
	<i>skipped question</i>	6

18. When you see a WOMAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that she will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	32.5%	94
a little more aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	41.2%	113
the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to aggression	26.0%	75
a little less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.3%	1
much less aggressive than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	289

19. Do you have a close family member or friend who has a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	71.3%	208
No <input type="checkbox"/>	28.7%	83
<i>answered question</i>		289
<i>skipped question</i>		5

20. Have you ever had someone try to discourage you from getting a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	50.2%	145
No <input type="checkbox"/>	49.8%	144
<i>answered question</i>		289
<i>skipped question</i>		5

21. Who has tried to discourage you from getting a tattoo? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a family member <input type="checkbox"/>	86.9%	128
a significant other (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/>	22.1%	32
a friend <input type="checkbox"/>	35.2%	51
a co-worker <input type="checkbox"/>	4.5%	7
an employer <input type="checkbox"/>	4.5%	7
a stranger <input type="checkbox"/>	5.5%	9
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	1.4%	2
<i>answered question</i>		145
<i>skipped question</i>		149

22. What did they tell you to try to discourage you? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
They said that tattooing hurts <input type="checkbox"/>	13.9%	20
They said that tattooing is dangerous (infection) <input type="checkbox"/>	30.6%	44
They said that tattooing is dangerous (disease) <input type="checkbox"/>	22.2%	32
They said that I might change my mind (regret) <input type="checkbox"/>	66.0%	95
They said that tattoos are not "nice" etc. <input type="checkbox"/>	59.7%	83
They say that it might impact my ability to get a good job <input type="checkbox"/>	49.3%	71
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	18.0%	23
	<i>answered question</i>	144
	<i>skipped question</i>	150

23. When you see a WOMAN with a small/somewhat hidden tattoo, you expect that she will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo	4.2%	12
a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo	21.4%	61
the same as a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo with regards to sexual activity	73.0%	209
a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo	0.4%	1
way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a small tattoo	1.1%	3
	<i>answered question</i>	285
	<i>skipped question</i>	9

24. When you see a MAN with a small/somewhat hidden tattoo, you expect that he will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo	1.4%	4
a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo	10.5%	30
the same as a man who doesn't have a small tattoo with regards to sexual activity	85.3%	243
a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo	1.8%	5
way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a small tattoo	1.1%	3
	<i>answered question</i>	285
	<i>skipped question</i>	9

25. When you see a WOMAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that she will be:		
	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	10.7%	30
a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	29.3%	82
the same as a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to sexual activity	58.6%	164
a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	1.1%	3
way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.4%	1
	<i>answered question</i>	280
	<i>skipped question</i>	14

26. When you see a MAN with a large/visually obvious tattoo, you expect that he will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	11.6%	33
a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	25.7%	73
the same as a man who doesn't have a large tattoo with regards to sexual activity	61.6%	175
a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.7%	2
way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have a large tattoo	0.4%	1
	<i>answered question</i>	284
	<i>skipped question</i>	10



27. When you see a woman with MULTIPLE tattoos, you expect that she will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	15.4%	47
a little more likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	30.1%	88
the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to sexual activity	52.4%	150
a little less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.3%	1
way less likely to sleep around than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.7%	2
	<i>answered question</i>	286
	<i>skipped question</i>	8

28. When you see a man with MULTIPLE tattoos, you expect that he will be:

	Response Percent	Response Count
much more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	14.7%	42
a little more likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	27.3%	79
the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to sexual activity	56.3%	161
a little less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	1.4%	4
way less likely to sleep around than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.3%	1
	<i>answered question</i>	286
	<i>skipped question</i>	8

29. I think it is appropriate for a MAN to have:

	Response Percent	Response Count
a large tattoo on his upper arm	56.4%	184
a small tattoo on his upper arm	66.9%	199
a large tattoo on his forearm	42.7%	120
a small tattoo on his forearm	54.4%	163
a large tattoo on his upper back	56.3%	180
a small tattoo on his upper back	37.6%	113
a large tattoo on his lower back	33.1%	93
a small tattoo on his lower back	36.1%	107
a large tattoo on his chest	42.7%	120
a small tattoo on his chest	57.3%	181
a large tattoo on his stomach	27.0%	75
a small tattoo on his stomach	37.0%	97
a large tattoo on his hip/thigh area	25.3%	71
a small tattoo on his hip/thigh area	37.0%	97
a large tattoo on his ankle/lower leg	36.7%	103
a small tattoo on his ankle/lower leg	42.0%	118
a large tattoo on his neck	27.6%	78
a small tattoo on his neck	40.2%	113
a tattooed foot	29.9%	84
tattoo sleeve(s)	33.1%	93
a tattoo shirt	23.5%	68
tattooed hands/knuckles	24.2%	69
a full body suit of tattoos	19.2%	54
None of the above	7.1%	20
Other (please specify)	10.0%	28
	answered question	281
	skipped question	13

30. I think it is appropriate for a WOMAN to have:

	Response Percent	Response Count
a large tattoo on her upper arm	27.6%	79
a small tattoo on her upper arm	52.0%	145
a large tattoo on her forearm	23.5%	63
a small tattoo on her forearm	42.7%	120
a large tattoo on her upper back	33.5%	94
a small tattoo on her upper back	31.6%	173
a large tattoo on her lower back	37.0%	104
a small tattoo on her lower back	71.5%	201
a large tattoo on her chest	20.6%	59
a small tattoo on her chest	35.6%	100
a large tattoo on her stomach	21.7%	61
a small tattoo on her stomach	43.4%	122
a large tattoo on her hip/thigh area	27.0%	73
a small tattoo on her hip/thigh area	33.0%	177
a large tattoo on her ankle/lower leg	30.2%	95
a small tattoo on her ankle/lower leg	69.0%	194
a large tattoo on her neck	19.2%	54
a small tattoo on her neck	38.4%	108
a tattooed foot	42.7%	120
tattoo sleeve(s)	16.1%	51
a tattoo shirt	14.2%	40
tattooed hands/knuckles	19.2%	54
a full body suit of tattoos	14.2%	40
None of the above	7.5%	21
Other (please specify)	11.4%	32
	<i>answered question</i>	281
	<i>skipped question</i>	13

31. When you see a MAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that he will be:		
	Response Percent	Response Count
of a much "higher class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	0.0%	0
of a somewhat "higher class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	1.1%	3
the same as a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to class	36.7%	108
of a somewhat "lower class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	48.0%	134
of a much "lower class" than a man who doesn't have multiple tattoos	12.2%	34
	<i>answered question</i>	279
	<i>skipped question</i>	15

32. When you see a WOMAN with multiple tattoos, you expect that she will be:		Response Percent	Response Count
of a much "higher class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	<input type="checkbox"/>	0.4%	1
of a somewhat "higher class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.4%	4
the same as a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos with regards to class	<input type="checkbox"/>	41.3%	117
of a somewhat "lower class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	<input type="checkbox"/>	44.5%	123
of a much "lower class" than a woman who doesn't have multiple tattoos	<input type="checkbox"/>	12.4%	35
<i>answered question</i>			283
<i>skipped question</i>			11

33. Please answer the following questions by checking ONLY ONE box for each of the following statements:						
	I strongly approve	I somewhat approve	I'm unsure	I somewhat disapprove	I strongly disapprove	Response Count
What is your response when you see a MAN with a butterfly tattoo?	9.5% (27)	13.4% (38)	32.2% (91)	29.3% (80)	16.6% (47)	293
What is your response when you see a WOMAN with a butterfly tattoo?	27.8% (78)	47.3% (134)	15.2% (43)	7.8% (22)	2.1% (6)	293
What is your response when you see a MAN with a skull & bones tattoo?	13.2% (37)	28.8% (81)	20.3% (57)	24.9% (70)	12.8% (36)	291
What is your response when you see a WOMAN with a skull & bones tattoo?	10.7% (30)	16.7% (47)	20.3% (57)	28.0% (77)	26.3% (74)	291
<i>answered question</i>						283
<i>skipped question</i>						11

34. Would you date a person who has a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
definitely yes <input type="checkbox"/>	59.4%	168
somewhat yes <input type="checkbox"/>	24.0%	69
undecided <input type="checkbox"/>	9.9%	29
somewhat no <input type="checkbox"/>	4.2%	12
definitely no <input type="checkbox"/>	2.5%	7
	<i>answered question</i>	283
	<i>skipped question</i>	11

35. Would you date a person if he/she had an unconventional tattoo? (eg. a man with a butterfly tattoo or a woman with a skull and crossbones tattoo)

	Response Percent	Response Count
definitely yes <input type="checkbox"/>	26.9%	77
somewhat yes <input type="checkbox"/>	32.3%	93
undecided <input type="checkbox"/>	25.8%	75
somewhat no <input type="checkbox"/>	14.8%	42
definitely no <input type="checkbox"/>	10.2%	29
	<i>answered question</i>	283
	<i>skipped question</i>	11

36. Would you date a person if he/she had a body suit of tattoos? (eg. tattoos covering most of the body with very little skin showing)

	Response Percent	Response Count
definitely yes	3.9%	28
somewhat yes	9.1%	23
undecided	12.0%	34
somewhat no	13.4%	52
definitely no	51.6%	143
<i>answered question</i>		283
<i>skipped question</i>		11

37. Which of the following terms have you heard someone use when referring to a tattoo on a woman's lower back? (Please check all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Count
firty	35.9%	102
sexy	66.9%	180
tramp stamp	45.2%	137
bullseye	33.7%	110
none of the above	9.1%	23
other	5.7%	19
<i>(please specify)</i>		20
<i>answered question</i>		284
<i>skipped question</i>		10



**38. Where have you heard this term used? (Please check all that apply)**

	Response Percent	Response Count
at school	74.6%	194
at work	23.5%	81
at social gatherings with friends/peers	71.2%	195
from family	16.5%	43
on the internet	26.5%	74
on television	55.6%	145
in movies	54.6%	142
Other (please specify)	3.1%	3
	<i>answered question</i>	260
	<i>skipped question</i>	34

**39. Have any of your friends or acquaintances, to your knowledge, had their tattoo referred to as a tramp stamp, a bulls-eye, or another similar term?**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	19.9%	62
No	52.1%	133
I don't know	28.0%	73
	<i>answered question</i>	261
	<i>skipped question</i>	33

40. I have experienced having my lower back tattoo referred to as (Please check all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Count
flirty	25.9%	7
sexy	65.4%	17
a tramp stamp	15.4%	4
a bulls-eye	25.9%	7
none of the above	30.5%	8
other	11.5%	3
(please specify)		4
answered question		26
skipped question		268

41. How did this experience impact you? (Please check all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Count
It made me feel sexy/attractive	35.4%	4
It didn't bother me at all	45.5%	5
I disregarded it	54.5%	8
I was offended	15.2%	2
I felt hurt	0.0%	0
It made me feel badly about my tattoo	0.0%	0
It made me feel badly about myself	9.1%	1
It made me regret my tattoo	0.0%	0
It made me feel angry towards the person who made the comment	27.3%	3
Other (please specify)	15.2%	2
answered question		11
skipped question		283

42. Are there any other forms of body modification that you are engaged in? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Ear lobe piercing <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	65.9%	188
Ear piercing (other than lobe) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	24.7%	63
Ear lobe stretching <input type="checkbox"/>	7.1%	19
Other facial piercing <input type="checkbox"/>	12.9%	33
Other body piercing <input type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	45
Scarification <input type="checkbox"/>	0.5%	2
Branding <input type="checkbox"/>	0.4%	1
Embedded tattoos <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
Cosmetic surgery <input type="checkbox"/>	1.6%	4
None of the above <input type="checkbox"/>	29.3%	67
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	1.6%	4
	<i>answered question</i>	255
	<i>skipped question</i>	39

43. Sex:





	Response Percent	Response Count
Male <input type="checkbox"/>	27.4%	77
Female <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	72.6%	204
Intersex <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
Transgender <input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	281
	<i>skipped question</i>	13

44. Age:

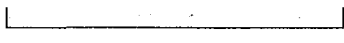
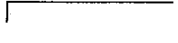





		Response Percent	Response Count
17 - 25	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	94.3%	287
26 - 35	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.5%	9
46 - 55	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.1%	3
36 - 45	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.6%	5
56 - 65	<input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
66 -	<input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
		answered question	283
		skipped question	11

45. For this question please indicate the approximate combined family income for the household that YOU GREW UP IN. Please indicate the amount as close as you can to Canadian dollars.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Less than \$10,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.0%	11
Between \$11,000 and \$20,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.9%	9
Between \$21,000 and \$30,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	7.7%	21
Between \$31,000 and \$40,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.5%	23
Between \$41,000 and \$50,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	9.1%	22
Between \$51,000 and \$60,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	6.6%	19
Between \$61,000 and \$70,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.2%	25
Between \$71,000 and \$80,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	5.4%	23
Between \$81,000 and \$90,000 a year	<input type="checkbox"/>	6.2%	17

Between \$91,000 and \$100,000 a year		11.7%	32
Between \$101,000 and \$120,000 a year		9.5%	24
Between \$120,000 and \$140,000 a year		5.9%	16
Over \$140,000 a year		11.0%	30
		<i>answered question</i>	273
		<i>skipped question</i>	21

46. How would you best describe your marital status?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Single		63.7%	179
Long term relationship		31.3%	83
Common Law		2.1%	6
Married		1.5%	5
Separated, but still legally married		0.4%	1
Divorced		0.4%	1
Widowed		0.4%	1
		<i>answered question</i>	281
		<i>skipped question</i>	13

47. Please indicate your ethnic or cultural background:

	Response Count
	283
<i>answered question</i>	266
<i>skipped question</i>	28

48. Please indicate your religion:

	Response Percent	Response Count
Roman Catholic <input type="checkbox"/>	24.6%	89
Protestant <input type="checkbox"/>	9.6%	27
Christian Orthodox <input type="checkbox"/>	3.9%	11
Christian, not included elsewhere <input type="checkbox"/>	13.9%	39
Muslim <input type="checkbox"/>	3.9%	11
Jewish <input type="checkbox"/>	3.1%	17
Buddhist <input type="checkbox"/>	3.9%	11
Hindu <input type="checkbox"/>	3.6%	10
Sikh <input type="checkbox"/>	1.4%	4
No religion <input type="checkbox"/>	21.4%	60
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	7.5%	21
	<i>answered question</i>	280
	<i>skipped question</i>	14

49. Please indicate which university faculty your program belongs to:

	Response Percent	Response Count
Business <input type="checkbox"/>	9.3%	23
Engineering <input type="checkbox"/>	13.0%	33
Health Sciences <input type="checkbox"/>	2.5%	7
Humanities <input type="checkbox"/>	16.5%	51
Sciences <input type="checkbox"/>	29.0%	93
Social sciences <input type="checkbox"/>	26.6%	79
	<i>answered question</i>	276
	<i>skipped question</i>	18

50. Please indicate what year of your program you are currently studying in:

	Response Percent	Response Count
1st	14.4%	40
2nd	27.7%	77
3rd	25.5%	71
4th	28.4%	79
5th and above	4.0%	11
<i>answered question</i>		278
<i>skipped question</i>		16

51. What is the highest educational degree that you aspire to?

	Response Count
	264
<i>answered question</i>	264
<i>skipped question</i>	30

52. Are there any other comments that you would like to add about tattooing?????

	Response Count
	135
<i>answered question</i>	135
<i>skipped question</i>	159

## Appendix M Survey Responses by Gender

**Table 1 - Female respondents only – Description of tattoos:**

4. Which of the following best describes your tattoo(s)? Please check all that apply.		Response Percent	Response Count
a large tattoo on my upper arm		0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my upper arm		0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my forearm		0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my forearm		0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my upper back		4.4%	2
a small tattoo on my upper back	<input type="checkbox"/>	13.3%	6
a large tattoo on my lower back	<input type="checkbox"/>	11.1%	5
a small tattoo on my lower back	<input type="checkbox"/>	28.9%	13
a large tattoo on my chest	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.2%	1
a small tattoo on my chest		4.4%	2
a large tattoo on my stomach		2.2%	1
a small tattoo on my stomach		0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my hip/thigh area	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.2%	1
a small tattoo on my hip/thigh area	<input type="checkbox"/>	28.9%	13
a large tattoo on my ankle/lower leg	<input type="checkbox"/>	6.7%	3
a small tattoo on my ankle/lower leg		11.1%	5
a large tattoo on my neck		0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my neck	<input type="checkbox"/>	6.7%	3
a tattooed foot	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	2
tattoo sleeve(s)		0.0%	0
a tattoo shirt		0.0%	0
tattooed hands/knuckles		0.0%	0
a full body suit of tattoos		0.0%	0
other		29.0%	9
<i>answered question</i>			<b>46</b>



**Table 2 - Male respondents only – description of tattoos:**

4. Which of the following best describes your tattoo(s)? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a large tattoo on my upper arm <input type="checkbox"/>	11.8%	2
a small tattoo on my upper arm <input type="checkbox"/>	29.4%	5
a large tattoo on my forearm <input type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	3
a small tattoo on my forearm <input type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	3
a large tattoo on my upper back <input type="checkbox"/>	23.5%	4
a small tattoo on my upper back <input type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	3
a large tattoo on my lower back	0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my lower back <input type="checkbox"/>	11.8%	2
a large tattoo on my chest	0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my chest	0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my stomach <input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	1
a small tattoo on my stomach	0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my hip/thigh area	0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my hip/thigh area	0.0%	0
a large tattoo on my ankle/lower leg <input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	1
a small tattoo on my ankle/lower leg <input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	1
a large tattoo on my neck	0.0%	0
a small tattoo on my neck <input type="checkbox"/>	11.8%	2
a tattooed foot	0.0%	0
tattoo sleeve(s) <input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	1
a tattoo shirt	0.0%	0
tattooed hands/knuckles	0.0%	0
a full body suit of tattoos	0.0%	0
other	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	17

**Table 3 - Female respondents only – tattoo visibility:**

5. How would you rate your tattoo(s) in terms of its visibility (whether or not people can easily see it in day to day encounters)?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Very visible	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	2
Somewhat visible	<input type="checkbox"/>	11.1%	5
Somewhat hidden	<input type="checkbox"/>	48.9%	22
Very hidden	<input type="checkbox"/>	35.6%	15
<i>answered question</i>			45
<i>skipped question</i>			159

**Table 4 - Male respondents only – tattoo visibility:**

5. How would you rate your tattoo(s) in terms of its visibility (whether or not people can easily see it in day to day encounters)?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Very visible	<input type="checkbox"/>	11.8%	2
Somewhat visible	<input type="checkbox"/>	23.5%	4
Somewhat hidden	<input type="checkbox"/>	23.5%	4
Very hidden	<input type="checkbox"/>	41.2%	7
<i>answered question</i>			17
<i>skipped question</i>			60

**Table 5 – Female respondents only – gender rating of tattoo:**

6. How would you rate your tattoo(s) overall in terms of its masculinity/femininity?		Response Percent	Response Count
very feminine	<input type="checkbox"/>	24.4%	11
<b>somewhat feminine</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	37.8%	17
neither feminine or masculine, neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>	33.3%	15
somewhat masculine	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.4%	2
very masculine	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.0%	0
<b>answered question</b>			<b>45</b>
<b>skipped question</b>			<b>159</b>

**Table 6 – Male respondents only – gender rating of tattoo:**

6. How would you rate your tattoo(s) overall in terms of its masculinity/femininity?		Response Percent	Response Count
very feminine	<input type="checkbox"/>	5.9%	1
somewhat feminine	<input type="checkbox"/>	0.0%	0
neither feminine or masculine, neutral	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	52.9%	9
somewhat masculine	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	23.5%	4
very masculine	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	17.6%	3
<b>answered question</b>			<b>17</b>
<b>skipped question</b>			<b>60</b>

**Table 7 – Female respondents only – reactions to tattoo:**

7. Overall, how have the people in your life reacted to your tattoo? Please answer below by placing only one checkmark after question:

	very positively	somewhat positively	neutral (neither positive or negative)	somewhat negatively	very negatively	they don't know about my tattoo	not applicable
How have your family members reacted to your tattoo(s)?	8.9% (4)	26.7% (12)	15.6% (7)	28.9% (13)	4.4% (2)	15.6% (7)	0.0% (0)
How has your significant other reacted to your tattoo(s)? (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)	33.3% (15)	20.0% (9)	20.0% (9)	6.7% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	20.0% (9)
How have your friends reacted to your tattoo(s)?	57.8% (26)	33.3% (15)	8.9% (4)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
How have your co-workers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	28.9% (13)	28.9% (13)	13.3% (6)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.9% (4)	20.0% (9)
How have your employers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	6.7% (3)	11.1% (5)	26.7% (12)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	26.7% (12)	28.9% (13)
How have strangers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	25.0% (11)	29.5% (13)	15.0% (7)	4.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	15.6% (7)	9.1% (4)

**Table 8 – Male respondents only – reactions to tattoo:**

7. Overall, how have the people in your life reacted to your tattoo? Please answer below by placing only one checkmark after question:

	very positively	somewhat positively	neutral (neither positive or negative)	somewhat negatively	very negatively	they don't know about my tattoo	not applicable
How have your family members reacted to your tattoo(s)?	17.6% (3)	47.1% (8)	17.6% (3)	17.6% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
How has your significant other reacted to your tattoo(s)? (spouse, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)	68.8% (10)	23.5% (4)	11.8% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.9% (1)
How have your friends reacted to your tattoo(s)?	58.8% (10)	23.5% (4)	17.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
How have your co-workers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	60.0% (8)	25.0% (4)	12.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.3% (1)	6.3% (1)
How have your employers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	5.9% (1)	5.9% (1)	41.2% (7)	5.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	17.6% (3)	23.5% (4)
How have strangers reacted to your tattoo(s)?	23.5% (4)	41.2% (7)	17.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	11.8% (2)	5.9% (1)

**Table 9 – Female respondents only – tattoo discouragement:**

20. Have you ever had someone try to discourage you from getting a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	52.9%	138
No <input type="checkbox"/>	47.1%	96
<i>answered question</i>		204
<i>skipped question</i>		0

**Table 10 – Male respondents only – tattoo discouragement:**

20. Have you ever had someone try to discourage you from getting a tattoo?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	40.3%	31
No <input type="checkbox"/>	59.7%	46
<i>answered question</i>		77
<i>skipped question</i>		0

**Table 11 – Female respondents only – reason for no tattoo:**

12. Why don't you have a tattoo? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Religious beliefs or values	8.2%	13
Fear of needles / pain	34.6%	55
Concern about infection	26.4%	42
Concern about the spread of disease	16.9%	30
Financial cost	19.2%	29
Dislike the way they look	23.3%	37
Concern about the disapproval of a significant other	10.1%	16
Concern about the disapproval of family	30.2%	46
Concern about the disapproval of friends	5.0%	8
Concern about the disapproval of coworkers and/or employers	15.1%	24
Concern about the reaction of strangers	5.7%	9
Never really thought of it	16.4%	26
Haven't found the "right" tattoo	44.0%	70
<b>Afraid I might change my mind later</b>	<b>63.5%</b>	<b>101</b>
Other (please specify)	14.5%	23
	<b>answered question</b>	<b>159</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>	<b>45</b>

**Table 12 – Male respondents only – reason for no tattoo:**

12. Why don't you have a tattoo? Please check all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Religious beliefs or values <input type="checkbox"/>	19.3%	11
Fear of needles / pain <input type="checkbox"/>	13.3%	6
Concern about infection <input type="checkbox"/>	15.0%	9
Concern about the spread of disease <input type="checkbox"/>	8.3%	5
Financial cost <input type="checkbox"/>	16.7%	10
Dislike the way they look <input type="checkbox"/>	35.3%	21
Concern about the disapproval of a significant other <input type="checkbox"/>	10.0%	6
Concern about the disapproval of family <input type="checkbox"/>	46.0%	27
Concern about the disapproval of friends <input type="checkbox"/>	8.3%	5
Concern about the disapproval of coworkers and/or employers <input type="checkbox"/>	25.0%	15
Concern about the reaction of strangers <input type="checkbox"/>	6.7%	4
Never really thought of it <input type="checkbox"/>	15.3%	11
Haven't found the "right" tattoo <input type="checkbox"/>	35.0%	21
Afraid I might change my mind later <input type="checkbox"/>	43.3%	26
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	6.7%	4
	<b>answered question</b>	<b>60</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>	<b>17</b>

**Table 13 – Female respondents only – dating:**

35. Would you date a person if he/she had an unconventional tattoo? (eg. a man with a butterfly tattoo or a woman with a skull and crossbones tattoo)

	Response Percent	Response Count
definitely yes <input type="checkbox"/>	30.9%	63
somewhat yes <input type="checkbox"/>	21.6%	44
undecided <input type="checkbox"/>	28.4%	56
somewhat no <input type="checkbox"/>	9.8%	20
definitely no <input type="checkbox"/>	9.3%	19
<b>answered question</b>		<b>204</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>0</b>

**Table 14 – Male respondents only – dating:**

35. Would you date a person if he/she had an unconventional tattoo? (eg. a man with a butterfly tattoo or a woman with a skull and crossbones tattoo)

	Response Percent	Response Count
definitely yes <input type="checkbox"/>	15.6%	12
somewhat yes <input type="checkbox"/>	24.7%	19
undecided <input type="checkbox"/>	19.5%	15
somewhat no <input type="checkbox"/>	27.3%	21
definitely no <input type="checkbox"/>	13.0%	10
<b>answered question</b>		<b>77</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>0</b>



**Appendix N**  
**Tattoo Survey SPSS Crosstabulation**

**Female Respondents - Self-rating of Tattoo by Family Reaction**

			How have your family members reacted to your tattoo?					Total	
			Very positively	Somewhat positively	Neutral	Somewhat negatively	Very negatively		They don't know about my tattoo
How would you rate your tattoo in terms of its masculinity or femininity?	Very Feminine	Count % of Total	1 2.2%	3 6.7%	3 6.7%	3 6.7%	0 .0%	1 2.2%	11 24.4%
	Somewhat Feminine	Count % of Total	1 2.2%	6 13.3%	1 2.2%	4 8.9%	1 2.2%	4 8.9%	17 37.8%
neither	Neither Masculine or Feminine	Count % of Total	2 4.4%	2 4.4%	3 6.7%	5 11.1%	1 2.2%	2 4.4%	15 33.3%
	Somewhat Masculine	Count % of Total	0 .0%	1 2.2%	0 .0%	1 2.2%	0 .0%	0 .0%	2 4.4%
	Somewhat Masculine	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	% of Total		.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%
<b>Total</b>	Count		4	12	7	13	2	7	45
	% of Total		8.9%	26.7%	15.6%	28.9%	4.4%	15.6%	100.0%

## Appendix O

### Saturday Night Live Skit on the Lower Back Tattoo

On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2004, NBC hosted a comedy skit by *Saturday Night Live*<sup>1</sup> called “Tattoo Remover” (season 29: episode 18) – a skit that situates women with lower back tattoos as the ‘butt’ of a joke regarding the permanency of ‘sexy’ tattoos that are acquired by women at a young age. This skit was consistently referred to by the interviewees in relation to lower back tattoos. It is transcribed as follows:

There is a serious problem afflicting a generation of women, and if not treated early on, it will only get worse as you grow older – really cool lower back tattoos. [The camera pans in on a middle aged, middle-class, Caucasian mother feeding her son breakfast. She has a lower back tattoo that says “Juicy”] It seemed like such a good idea at the time, didn’t it? Hello, I’m Dr. Edward Turlington. Studies show that next to smoking and having sex, a lower back tattoo is the best thing a young woman can do to be cool. And you ladies *were* cool. But now look at you, lets face it, you’re not young anymore, you’re not even close. That’s why you need Turlington’s lower back tattoo remover. Look, here’s a really cool lower back tattoo on an attractive 22

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<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Night Live* skit, “tattoo removal”  
[<http://youtube.com/watch?v=WcVU0uIxYqQ>], Retrieved 02/15/07.

year old girl. Now watch what happens to that tattoo when that girl becomes a 65 year old woman. [The lower back tattoo shown says 'pretty lady'. As the woman's back ages and becomes wrinkly and heavier, the tattoo morphs to say 'pretty sad'] Pretty sad indeed. That's why I developed Turlington's lower back tattoo remover. Just apply once, every hour, for 72 straight hours, and watch that tattoo slowly burn away. [The middle aged mother applying the tattoo remover exclaims "mother \*\*\*\*er!"] That burn means it's working! Soon enough that silly mistake will be long gone, and that slight discoloration [The camera pans to her severely scarred lower back] will be the only thing to remind you of that crazy weekend in Jamaica. Well, maybe not the only thing. [Her younger Jamaican son runs into the room to hug her alongside her Caucasian son. Audience laughter.] Turlington's lower back tattoo remover. Because it won't be cool forever.<sup>2</sup>

This skit summarizes many of the basic assumptions that we have already discussed in relation to the lower back tattoo: the intentional exhibition of 'sexy' as implied by the "Juicy" text; the idea that lower back tattoos are 'meaningless' in the sense that they are only acquired as a way for young women to be "cool"; the association of the tattoo location with female promiscuity as indicated by the

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<sup>2</sup> Transcribed from clip: [http://www.guzer.com/videos/sn1\\_tattoo\\_removal.php](http://www.guzer.com/videos/sn1_tattoo_removal.php). Accessed 05/06/08.

Jamaican son conceived while on vacation; and the reference to a lower back tattoo on an older woman as “pretty sad” – a reference to perception that a woman’s tattoos need to be carefully chosen in order to ‘span that test of time’, as was discussed in Chapter 2.