

Tattoos – the window into the self



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Abstract

For many years, there has been much stigma surrounding tattoos, especially speaking about women. Tattoos are typically viewed as something masculine that no woman should have. However, tattoos are just another thing that people use to decorate their bodies and express who they are. In this thesis, I have studied the experiences of tattooed women and how they use tattoos to express themselves to better understand the role of tattoos in women's lives and to reduce the stigma surrounding them. I conducted a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews with four tattooed women. I analyzed the data by using Erving Goffman as a theoretical framework, focusing on his concepts of frontstage and backstage, sign vehicles, and his theory on how people are assigned roles by society. The data shows that two women interviewed experience stigma because of their tattoos, while the other two do not. The ones that do not experience any judgment surrounding their tattoos can show off their tattoos whenever they want, and they use them to express to others who they are. On the other hand, the women who experience stigma are forced to hide their tattoos around people who see tattoos as taboo, which stops them from freely expressing themselves. Women use tattoos as self-expression when they are in situations where their interactions will be positive or when they are in the privacy of their home or backstage.

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1. Introduction

Tattoos are not a new concept, they have been around for many years and would arguably be one of the oldest and most used form of permanent body modifications (Kosut, 2015).

However, they have become more socially acceptable and more popular, especially when looking at different media. They have become more accessible due to social media, where tattoo artists show their work and ideas, and typically younger generations make tattoos less taboo. This is usually viewed as an act of rebellion, but like anyone, people like to express themselves and shape how people view them. However, younger generations usually ignore societal norms and like to push the boundaries of what a person should look like.

When talking about tattoos, it is essential to understand what they are precisely. Tattoos are not just fashion pieces or accessories; they are embedded into the body forever. It is not just a consumer good; you cannot simply shop for a tattoo and get another one to replace it. It is considered an ironic fad or anti-fashion (Sweetman, 1999; Kosut, 2006); it cannot become a trend or go in or out of fashion because of its permanence. Getting a tattoo requires time, planning, and pain, which is why people need to put thought and individualized touches to it.

1.1 Stigma around tattoos

In the past, tattoos were viewed as deviant behavior, a lot of men in prison or a gang would get tattooed, or they were associated with drug addicts or in subcultures like punk (Kosut, 2006, 2015; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Recent research (Koch et al., 2005) shows a correlation between tattoos and people with psychological disorders and engaging in certain sexual behaviors, like heightened sexual activity and becoming sexually active at a younger age. More research shows that tattoos are linked to impulsive, risky, or sensation-seeking behavior (Tate & Shelton, 2008), therefore tattoos have a negative connotation. Conservative and older generations tend to have these views still, and the younger generations are making tattoos more normalized (Roberts, 2016). Progressively people are starting to accept tattoos because it has become more common for people to have tattoos. Kosut (2006) suggests that there are more people with tattoos in advertisements, which may be one of the reasons why it has become more accepted for people to have tattoos. There is a shift, and it is crucial to understand it and the new meaning attributed to tattoos.

1.2 Tattooed women

Why do people get tattoos? Is there a deeper meaning than just pretty art? How do people consider tattoos self-expression? When studying the impact tattoos have on people, these are questions raised by sociologists. In this thesis, I aim to study tattoos and how women use them as a form of self-expression. I want to focus more on what it is like to have tattoos and how they can be used as self-expression. The topic and issue of tattooed women are relevant in the literature on the subject of tattoos, hence the decision to research how people use tattoos to express themselves but focus specifically on women because they have a much more challenging experience with being tattooed. The stigma around tattoos is still present today, but it is more significant in tattooed women (Kosut, 2000). It is an exciting concept that someone would get something done to their body that will permanently be there, even though humans change and grow, and sometimes the meaning of their tattoos will also change. So why would anyone want to get tattoos? What if they get tattooed something they will not like or even hate when they get older? Things never stay the same, but one thing that never changes is that people will always need to express themselves and control how they will be perceived.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

For this thesis, I will first present the relevant literature, theory, and concepts surrounding people's tattoo experiences and how people choose to present themselves to others. To answer the research question, I have chosen to use Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and concepts to analyze how people act in the frontstage and backstage, how they use sign vehicles, and their assigned roles. Then in chapter 3, I will explain the choice of the research plan, the design of the interview guide, the recruitment of interview participants, the anonymization of the informants, and how I carried out the research itself. Next, in chapter 4, I will present the empirical findings from the interviews and analyze and discuss them in parallel. Finally, I will finish by concluding and reflecting on the research.

2. Theory/literature review

In this chapter, I will present the relevant literature dealing with how tattooed people and others without see tattoos and how tattooed people navigate life with the stigma of being tattooed. I will also present research on how women experience tattoos and use them for self-expression. I will use Erving Goffman and his theoretical framework for this thesis to analyze my findings. I will focus on his concepts of frontstage and backstage, sign vehicles, and the roles people play that are assigned by society.

Sociologists (Kosut, 2000, 2015; Roberts, 2016) are trying to show that tattoos are not just marks of deviance and psychological shortcomings. When talking about tattoos and trying to understand them and break the stigma surrounding them, people differentiate between visible and non-visible tattoos because it influences the social acceptability of one's tattoos (Roberts, 2016). A visible tattoo is placed somewhere where it can always be visible to others, like hands and neck, but also arms and legs, because they become visible if the person wears clothing that reveals them. A non-visible tattoo is usually placed somewhere around the torso, where it is covered by clothing and others cannot see, except for intimate partners. People are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with tattoos and how they affect their social relationships; therefore, they may pick a discreet placement to avoid stigma (Roberts, 2016). Body modifications, like diets to lose fat, and getting cosmetic surgeries to change or enhance one's appearance, are generally more accepted in society, but people view tattoos as stigmatizing symbols (Kosut, 2000). It has been observed that people with older styles of tattoos are more discriminated against than people with contemporary designs, the more mainstream and "trendy" designs. There is a similar stigma when hiring people with tattoos; managers do not want to hire someone with a tattoo and have a client turn away because of the tattoo. Even managers that have concealable tattoos discriminate against employees that have visible tattoos because those tattoos will not be able to be hidden by clothes. Younger people view tattoos as a way to express themselves, but they are aware that older people still have prejudice. Therefore, they shy away from having tattoos that are always visible, even though they do not think anything is wrong with them; they want to be accepted by those who may have stigma (Roberts, 2016). There is still a long road ahead to destigmatize tattoos.

2.1 Women's experience of being tattooed

Western societies in the past have associated tattoos with men because of the pain that comes from getting them and the stereotypes of a tattooed person. Today it is considered that when a woman gets tattoos, it is in resistance to how society views the female body (Johnson, 2007). Weak, pure, and beautiful, getting a tattoo can be effective in fighting the conservative bodily proscriptions through a “historically deviant masculine symbol” (Kosut, 2000, p97). The women in Kosut's research referred to their tattoos in relation to their bodies and how they take ownership and control over their bodies by “rejecting capitalist patriarchal prescriptions that define and regulate the appearance of the female body” (Kosut, 2000, p97). Women deliberately getting something considered masculine are reclaiming and redefining their femininity and sexuality (Kosut, 2000). As people have oppressed women historically, the resurgence of tattooed women is a new way for them to fight gender stereotypes.

It can be considered brave of them to get tattoos because of the stigma and judgment people have over those with tattoos, especially from seeing women break from mainstream culture and society (Johnson, 2007). A study on undergraduates' perception of women with tattoos and without shows that women and men find women with tattoos less attractive, more sexually promiscuous, and heavier drinkers than women without tattoos (Swami & Furnham, 2007). Furthermore, the decision to study how women use tattoos to express themselves is in line with the backlash and negative views people have of tattooed women. The sources above show that there is still a fight that women must go through to be accepted.

2.2 Self-expression

In this thesis, I will use the term “self-expression” to describe how people choose to get tattoos, either pictures or words, on their bodies to show others or for themselves their most authentic selves. Self-expression through tattoos is a way for people to express their individuality, creativity, or personal beliefs. When it comes to reasons why people choose to get tattoos, there are as many people getting tattooed. However, when asked why they got their tattoos, one of the most common answers is because they express themselves and their values (Johnson, 2007). Tattoos, in addition, make people feel in control and anchor their unique self as an expression of individuality, and it gives the feeling of agency over one's body (Kosut, 2006). A study (Mun et al., 2012) shows that 82% of women with tattoos connected their tattoos to some aspect of the self. However, some of the women were dissatisfied with the tattoo after some time and wanted to remove it; this was the case for the women who felt the tattoos did not align with who they were and what they stood for

anymore. The women who did not assign a meaning to a tattoo regretted it because they got it on a whim; this shows their impulsive behavior and acts as a memory of that spontaneous decision. Nevertheless, this does not discredit their choice of having a tattoo or having it for expressing themselves. The tattoos' meaning evolves over time; consequently, because we are human and growing and changing, tattoos become a memory of who those people were when they got them.

2.3 Frontstage and backstage

In this thesis, Erving Goffman's (2022) dramaturgical framework will be employed as the theoretical framework. Goffman uses the theater as an analogy for how people interact in social interactions to explain his theoretical concepts. His description of actors as people that perform on the front of the stage, wearing masks and costumes, acting as a version of themselves in public social settings is essential for this thesis as it will help understand how women use tattoos to express themselves. Goffman describes interactions as actors performing, following their fellow actors' actions, and controlling how they want to be perceived, setting themselves in the best light. Each interaction influences the various parts performers will play (Goffman, 2022, p. xviii-3). The front stage is where decorum is present, where the performance takes place; it is considered sacred and treated seriously, with formality, though formality is not as present in modern Western society as it used to be before (Goffman, 2022, p. 5-10). Then actors move backstage, it is placed behind the curtain, and the audience cannot see; if the audience sees them backstage, it ruins the performance. Finally, performers drop their act; they practice and prepare for future performances. Here is where people can be their most authentic selves, where they have to switch between characters so the "mask" they were wearing on stage comes off. Backstage is where the performer and performance team bond on a deeper level, where there is familiarity, as opposed to formality on the frontstage (Goffman, 2022, p. 92-96).

Roberts (2016) and Mun et al. (2012) have reported that some tattooed people in their study become more aware of what they wear only after getting tattoos because the clothes make them visible or non-visible. Consequently, some people started to plan what they would wear to cover their tattoos if they felt like they would not be in a safe environment and one free of judgment (Roberts, 2016; Mun et al., 2012). The goal of this thesis is, by using Goffman's perspective, to discover why tattooed people choose how to present themselves. Is it so that they will not be discredited? Or is it because they feel empowered by the tattoos they have?

Placing the decision to have tattoos is a backstage decision. I will study how my participants go back and forth in these stages during the decision-making process and, once they decide, how they behave in the front stage. I will also look into how they think ahead of time about where they place tattoos; it may be because it is easy to conceal if needed, so they have control over whom the audience will be. Roberts (2016) reported that tattoos could have positive effects backstage; people feel more confident and like themselves and can even help people with frontstage performances. This is something I will investigate with my participants. Goffman views the body as a prop for performers to successfully manage impressions on the frontstage (Goffman, 2022). Therefore, I will explore why the women I interview alter their bodies with images. Nevertheless, stigma plays a significant role in where and how tattooed people show their tattoos and how they show themselves to others. Some tattooed people may not care, but they cannot control how others react to their tattoos.

2.4 Sign vehicles

In the modern world, people do not wear masks, makeup, or costumes to play a specific character they want to convey to the audience. Instead, the audience identifies and understands what role the performers play by looking at their actions and what Goffman calls “sign vehicles”. These sign vehicles are things that people are born with, like race, gender, size (Goffman, 2022, p. xiii-xvii), and looks, but others may choose to add a more permanent sign vehicle. Permanent body modifications may be tattoos, diets, and cosmetic surgeries (Kosut, 2000). In this thesis, by focusing on tattoos, I will ask how tattoos make women feel and how they use tattoos to navigate the world. Do these tattoos help them to say something? Do the tattoos convey the message they want to give out? Or do these tattoos are even intended to be used as a message? Some women might use tattoos just as a way to decorate their bodies.

Goffman established that how people behave and express themselves and their physical appearance would influence the outcome of the social exchange. People read the sign vehicles to make assumptions about people regarding their looks, like race and gender, as mentioned earlier, but also personal choices like clothing or hairstyle, which function as a communicative device. Nevertheless, tattoos are pictures on the body, which can communicate more than the typical and more accepted body modifications because “it employs a unique form of articulation” (Kosut, 2000, p82) and can be read in many ways. However, for the tattoo to be a form of non-verbal communication, it needs to be visible to

others; therefore, it is a crucial decision that people make when they pick the placement to control who the audience will be.

2.5 The roles assigned to people

Goffman (2022, p 10-19) believes that people's roles and the different fronts they perform on are not things they can control. He sees the people manipulating the already created fronts, which are backstage and frontstage; they are not creators of the social world, they are just animators of the world. People get to pick existing things like jobs and education and use those things to customize their life. They know what the rules are, and they try to meet the ideal that exists in people's minds. Moreover, most characters are ready-made and socially produced for people to animate. Many of the roles they play are not chosen, they are forced on them, and they are structurally predetermined to play specific roles. These roles can limit people, and the mask has a life of its own with energy that has more power than the performer. Goffman distinguishes between the performer, the existential self, and the character, or a performed self. During an interaction, there is no true self or identifiable performer behind the roles; the roles are just the performer. Goffman believes that people present not as themselves but as someone they want to be. Additionally, Goffman believes that people's most important task is to have successful performances. Even though people might not be able to choose their roles, they all want to be accepted and to fit in society with everyone else.

I will consider this perspective when analyzing my findings, and I want to find out if the women choose to get tattoos for themselves, for their own self-expression, or if they get something out of their tattoos if they are a part of their performances. Will their choices of getting tattoos, something considered taboo by some, change their opinion of their tattoos? Do they regret doing something stigmatizing? Or are they content in their choice, even if they may receive negative comments and do not adhere to the expectations and the roles they are given?

2.6 Limitations of Goffman's theory

Goffman's dramaturgical theory is based on the idea that social interactions are performances people have to act. Goffman neglects to think about the fact that people are not always performing for others, and people might not always be aware they are being watched and do

not realize they are performing. The theory is limiting because it subscribes to the idea that humans often act instead of being and thinking individually. It seems socially constructed beliefs limit their idea of what a person should do or look for others. Goffman's dramaturgical theory is lacking, where I would hope to fill the blanks with this study.

3. Method

3.1 Choice of method

In order to answer how women use tattoos to express themselves, what tattoos mean to them, and what their experience is of being a tattooed woman, I have conducted in-depth interviews with five tattooed women. The choice of in-depth interviews allowed me to not only go deeper into their experiences of having tattoos but also helped me focus on how they individually use their tattoos to express to others who they are. Therefore, qualitative research would best gather the data, get to know the informants and understand their answers, as qualitative research is used to find detailed information (Bryman, 2016).

3.2 Sampling of participants

Women between the ages of 20 to 30 who have gotten tattoos in the past three years and have a fair amount of skin covered in tattoos or have more than three tattoos were selected for the interviews. The choice of such a sample was to enable their reflection on their experiences of having tattoos and having lived with tattoos. The decision to choose young women for this project was made to ensure that the informants were in the process of trying to figure out who they are and how they express that through tattoos. In addition, the choice of selecting women with a higher number of tattoos was made to ensure that they were experienced enough and had both visible and non-visible tattoos. The visibility of tattoos is an essential aspect of this thesis, as it gives insight into how these women use tattoos to express themselves.

3.3 Anonymity

In line with the guidelines from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), the anonymization requirements were followed where each participant was anonymized and given pseudo names: Andrea, Bianca, Camilla, and Danielle. All the data from the participants was saved under these pseudo names. There would be no risk of recognition based on the information the participants would give about their experiences of being tattooed women, hence why no other procedure was taken to anonymize the data.

3.4 Making of the interview guide

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to allow the participants to lead the conversation and interpret the questions however they wanted. A semi-structured interview is

a less structured interview with set-out themes and open questions. (Bryman, 2016). This way, open-ended data was collected to explore the participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about tattoos; and to delve deeply into personal issues. An interview guide was created to ensure the informants were asked about the needed information, but it still allowed me to ask follow-up questions to elaborate on the participants' answers. The interview guide was divided into four parts and had two main themes: "being a tattooed woman" and "using tattoos as self-expression". The interview guide started with warm-up questions so the informants would ease into the interview. Then, the middle part of the interview guide was organized into two themes, and these questions were meant to go deeper into the subjects and keep them open so the informants could choose to speak on their own and not sway them to answer in a specific way. Finally, in the last part of the interview guide, the interview ended by asking the informants for their advice for any young woman thinking of getting tattoos to reflect on their overall experience of getting tattoos.

3.5 The process of interviewing

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the interviews lasted between 33 and 44 minutes. All participants received a form with the necessary information about the project and asked for their consent to participate. Bryman (2016) mentions how conducting interviews in places where the informants are comfortable is essential. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in their home, at school in a group room, which every informant got to decide where they felt most comfortable and "at home", and one long-distance interview through the phone. All the interviews were recorded using the Nettskjema Dictaphone app and stored them on the Nettskjema website. The choice of recording was made to ensure that the data collection was accurate, additionally, not just to know what people are thinking but how they would express it.

The first interview conducted was a pilot interview, which helped to see if the interview guide needed any changes, but the data collected from it were still used. After the pilot interview, more questions needed to be added, and the existing questions needed to be edited. During the interview, the informant was going through the questions quicker than assumed, so I added some questions that I previously wanted to have in my interview guide and that I thought were relevant, but I assumed it would make the interviews too long. Moreover, the informant seemed to have some issues answering some of the questions, and they voiced how

they had never thought of some of the things that were asked. Accordingly, I decided to share the interview guide with the rest of the informants before conducting their interviews to ensure that they have collected their thoughts about these more profound subjects. After editing and adding to the interview guide, the second interview was shorter, but the interview was informative, and the participant answered all the questions. Unfortunately, the recording from the third interview had some technical difficulties, and I only took a few notes from that interview, hence why her data will not be included in the thesis. However, the rest of the interviews went smoothly, and a replacement was found for the interview that experienced issues.

3.6 Method of analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim, except for the third interview, as it had suffered from technical difficulties. After transcribing the interviews, I read through them and sought after the common topics, and labeled the text with the codes. Initially, there were 22 codes explaining the research question's different parts. Furthermore, the codes were edited and placed under themes and the ones that were unimportant were deleted. Because I wanted to find out how women use tattoos to express themselves and the experiences of tattooed women, I was seeking codes and themes that would answer the research question. The themes created were “the meaning of tattoos”, “the message of tattoos”, “negative experiences”, and “tattooed women”.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

In this chapter, I will present and analyze the empirical findings from the interviews I conducted. I chose to combine the empirical findings and the analysis in one chapter to present the data and use the chosen theory and concepts to analyze the data as I go through the data. This section aims to show why people get tattooed, their experience of being tattooed, and how gender plays in the process of getting tattooed and in their daily lives.

4.1 The meaning of tattoos

As Johnson (2007) states in their study how there are as many reasons why people get tattoos as there are tattooed people, I found that statement to be true in my data as well. The informants talked about how their tattoos are meant to represent their identity as a woman or their sexual orientation, reclaim their body, make them feel more confident, self-assured, to commemorate people they love or their pets, to inspire them to be whom they want to be, to help them heal, to be happy, to connect to their bodies and ground themselves, to feel less naked and exposed, to celebrate their favorite books, movies and TV shows.

As this thesis focuses on how women use tattoos to express themselves, it is essential to state the fact that all informants mentioned that their tattoos mean self-expression to them.

However, only three of them, Andrea, Camilla, and Danielle, give their tattoos a deeper meaning. At the same time, Bianca states that her tattoos do not have a special meaning, her tattoos are just pretty art she likes to have on her body to express her style. These three women stated in one way or another how tattoos represent who they are and that their tattoos make them feel more like themselves; Danielle states “They (people) can just take a look at me, and they get to know who I am as a person”. However, all informants mention how they have a few tattoos that do not have a meaning and that they still like to get pretty tattoos and like how they look. These views of their tattoos are a good representation of people as other studies have shown that most people get tattoos as a form of self-expression, and some of them also get them to decorate their bodies just because they are pretty pieces of art.

As Goffman indicates, people use sign vehicles to express to others the role they want to perform, and my data shows that these women are not trying to play any role, they are trying to be their true selves. Looking only at these statements, the women interviewed have the desire to express themselves through tattoos, even though they do not assign a deeper meaning to all their tattoos. Additionally, Danielle mentions how her tattoos are a good

indicator for people to know who she is. However, this data shows that they are using sign vehicles as a visual communicator to others, even though they may not be aware of it, which I will discuss in the following subchapters.

4.2 The message of tattoos

When asked what they are trying to communicate or what kind of statement they are trying to give off, three out of four informants stated that they do not think of how their tattoos come across to others. Most of the time, they are indifferent to external attention; they do not care or do not pay attention to how others take in their tattoos, while Danielle mentions how she wants to communicate to others through her tattoos who she is and what experiences she has been through. She states:

I like visible tattoos [...] because I do believe that our bodies are a canvas and it's a way of expressing ourselves through tattoos, and I like to show people [...] I like people to read me, you know what I mean? So I want people to look at me and be like "Oh, this is who you are as a person".

Additionally, three out of four informants express how they do not intentionally communicate a message to others through their tattoos because their tattoos are for themselves and only for them to enjoy. Andrea and Bianca both mention how they assume and hope that their tattoos will attract the same kind of people they are and the people with similar political views and ways of expression. Andrea states:

I couldn't necessarily always say how that message could be received, but I would hope that people looking at and seeing that I have tattoos would hopefully signal to the kinds of people that are similar to me that I am someone to approach or someone who they might find likeness in

All the informants answered that they have visible and non-visible tattoos, and none of them have tattoos they try to keep private or hidden from others. They all think their tattoos are meant for them and do not care if they are visible to others. This is clear when the informants mention that they pick the placement of their tattoos where they can see them, so they can admire them, not necessarily for others to do the same. Only two informants, Andrea and Camilla, try to intentionally show off their tattoos in certain situations. Andrea talks about how she volunteers for a queer youth group and the oldest sibling in her family, where she tries to be a good example for those younger people she is surrounded by. Her thought process around it is that she wants to show those younger people that it is all right to have tattoos and express themselves however they want; additionally, she states that she feels cool

having her tattoos on show around those age groups because she gets a lot of compliments and praise from them.

On the other hand, Camilla intentionally shows off her tattoos when she has tattoo appointments because, in the past, many of the tattoo artists in the shops would assume she was not tattooed and that she was new to getting tattooed, just because she was covered by clothes, and they could not see them. People assuming she is new to getting tattoos started to make her feel insulted and too weak to get tattoos, hence why she now makes the conscious decision to wear clothing that will reveal her tattoos so the artists will take her more seriously. Besides these two specific situations, they do not intentionally show off their tattoos. The other two informants, Bianca and Danielle, stated that they do not try to show off their tattoos in any situation. Danielle thinks that “they’re (the tattoos) doing a pretty good job at visibly showing themselves, I don’t have to do it on purpose”.

The statements presented above show that Goffman’s theory about how people want to be perceived in a certain way and how they consciously do things to play a particular role do not necessarily support his theory. The fact that these women do not want to present a message to others and do not intentionally dress in a way to show off their tattoos indicates that their tattoos are meant for themselves, most of the time. Andrea and Camilla mention moments where they intentionally show off their tattoos, the rest of the time, they want to live their lives and do not pay attention to how people react to their tattoos. Additionally, Danielle does not try to show off her tattoos, but she does want people to see her tattoos and learn who she is from them, she is the only one out of the four informants that state she is trying to get a message across to others. An explanation for why she does not intentionally show off her tattoos could be because she does not pay attention to how she looks when she puts on a play on the frontstage.

I argue that even though Andrea, Camilla, and Danielle say they do not care what others think about their tattoos and do not try to get a message across, their actions say something different. Andrea likes having her tattoos on the show because she gets complimented, and Camilla does not want to seem weak or inexperienced in front of tattoo artists. These actions point out that they intend to convey a message of seeming cool and a tough and experienced woman. They consciously choose to have their tattoos visible in certain situations, and Danielle wants to be read by others, which can be understood as trying to achieve something more meaningful through their tattoos. Their tattoos become sign vehicles that they use in

their performances to influence how others see them. However, since they are trying to show off their tattoos instead of hiding them, it becomes clear that the roles they are performing are their true selves because they do not try to be anyone else or play a different role. They get to express themselves whenever they want, and more specifically for Andrea and Camilla, around family and friends. I am excluding Bianca from this argument because she never stated that she intentionally shows off her tattoos; she has a different experience from the rest. In the following subchapter, I will present her negative experiences of having her tattoos visible and how she copes with the judgment.

4.3 Negative experiences

As expected, some of the informants experienced negative reactions from people because of their tattoos. Bianca and Danielle have experienced a lot of negative comments and treatment from family members, resulting in them having to cover up their tattoos with clothing to ensure that they would not receive any more negative reactions. Bianca has expressed how her father's side of the family perceives tattoos as taboo and does not want to support a young member of the family getting tattoos, which has resulted in her always wearing tops with sleeves to hide her tattoos when she is around them. She has also received negative reactions from her father, who seems more supportive and accepting of her making whatever decisions she wants. On the other hand, Danielle was raised in a Muslim household and a country with a predominantly Muslim population. She has expressed how her father did not accept her decision to get a tattoo when she got her first, while her mother was more accepting of tattoos. Her father refused to speak to her for a few weeks after he saw her tattoo, but since then, he has come to terms with her choice and now accepts her. While her extended family is aware of her multiple tattoos, Danielle chooses to cover up at family gatherings to respect their religious beliefs.

When asked if they ever hide their tattoos, only Bianca and Danielle mention that they do. As stated above, both women hide their tattoos at extended family gatherings. Additionally, Bianca sometimes hides her tattoos at work at a traditional Norwegian clothing store. She states that she feels like she is not taken seriously if her tattoos are visible to her coworkers and clients that come into the shop, hence why she wears clothes that cover her arms. Only these two women are affected negatively by how others perceive tattoos and tattooed people. However, that does not stop them from getting more tattoos, expressing themselves through them, and letting these tattoos be visible in other moments where they can be their true

selves. I want to point out the stigma these women face, and other women in the studies presented in this thesis, because of their tattoos and how that stigma will not stop them from being who they truly are. Consequently, they must be conscious of what spaces and people will be safe to have their tattoos visible.

Looking at the statements of these two women, they can prove Goffman's theory to be true. Even though Bianca mentioned that she does not intentionally show off her tattoos, she does cover them up in situations where she will most likely be judged. This implies that she does care to some extent how she comes off to people and what kind of role she plays on the frontstage. She has learned the behavior of others and how they react to her tattoos, and since she wants to be accepted by people, she chooses to hide her tattoos so that her roles and performances will be successful. Even though Danielle has expressed how much she likes to have her tattoos visible and how she wants people to read her, she wants to be respectful of her extended family, so she chooses to play a role that will be successful around them, where she will be accepted and not stigmatized. Unfortunately, their negative experiences stop them from fully expressing themselves and playing the role that matches their most authentic selves.

Andrea and Camilla both mention how they might get negative comments about their tattoos, but neither of them pays attention to it, and Andrea mentions explicitly:

Maybe there have been a negative comment here and there that I might not have taken in, [...] any negativity that might be in the eyes of "Oh you're a woman so you should not have tattoos" kinda rolls off my back because of the fact that tattoos do so much for me in terms of self-expression and self-assuredness.

These two women have experienced little to no negativity because of their tattoos, and they are the only ones that mention how they receive positive attention from people. As I have mentioned before, Andrea likes to show off her tattoos around her siblings or other younger people to be a good example for them and because she enjoys the compliments she receives from them. On the other hand, Camilla says she likes to show off her tattoos because they look pretty, and she also has received positive reactions from people around her. Danielle has received some negativity in the past from her father, and she does cover up her tattoos around her extended family. However, she likes to have her tattoos visible at any other moment because she likes people to read her tattoos to understand who she is. Finally, Bianca shows

the least excitement in showing off her tattoos and applies the least amount of meaning to her tattoos.

Arguably, Andrea, Camilla, and Danielle show off their tattoos the most because they experience positive interactions due to their tattoos and because they refer a deeper meaning to them. They all mention that their tattoos are for themselves, but Bianca seems to be the one that shows her tattoos to others the least. Bianca and Danielle's choice to conform to people's expectations by covering their tattoos can point to them wanting to be accepted for who they are but still having to cover up a part of their true selves. Their choice of covering them up does not take away from their self-expression; just because their family or other people still carry stigma around tattoos does not mean it takes away their ability to be their most authentic selves in other situations. They still choose to get more tattoos, and the negativity they have experienced does not stop them from expressing themselves; it just has to happen in selected moments. Since Andrea and Camilla have gotten positive reinforcements due to their tattoos, this could be explained by Goffman's theory, and argue that they want to experience more of these positive reactions, so they choose to keep showing their tattoos. Their performances are so successful because of their roles and the sign vehicle they choose to get and show off. Andrea and Camilla's self-expressions are being rewarded and more accepted, which can point to the fact that the roles they perform are the closest to their most authentic selves; they do not adhere to any of the roles that society is trying to push on them. Additionally, the fact that Andrea and Camilla never cover up their tattoos intentionally does not support Goffman's view of how people present themselves as someone they would like to be and not as themselves. These two women are examples of people who are proud of their tattoos, who never want to hide their most authentic selves but also experience some luck in the sense that they are surrounded by people who accept them no matter what. The roles they play align with who they are backstage, so there is no role or character they are trying to perform in front of others. Their backstage or true selves are whom they perform on the frontstage; it could also be argued that they do not necessarily perform at all because they do not hide their tattoos. Andrea and Camilla get the opportunity to use their tattoos as self-expression whenever they want, which seems very often. It cannot be said the same about Bianca and Danielle because of the stigma they experience around their family.

4.4 Tattooed women

I have certainly talked about tattooed women so far in this chapter, but one of the main subjects of this thesis is how the concept of gender influences these people's lives. All the participants were asked directly about their experiences as tattooed women and if they think they are judged more harshly because of their gender. They all mention how they either have seen or experienced the stigma of being a woman with tattoos, but more so in the past than in recent years.

Camilla mentions how she does not experience any negativity from her being a tattooed woman, except from the tattoo artists that would assume she is new to getting tattooed. However, she thinks it has nothing to do with her being a woman. Andrea has not experienced any negativity, only some concerns from older family members, but again, she believes it has nothing to do with her gender but more to do with them being concerned about her not getting a job. Danielle talks about how her experience as a woman growing up in Kuwait, a very religious country, was challenging because she heard from everyone that women should not get tattoos because it is not feminine. She specifically mentions how a woman with tattoos was frowned upon in her community. However, she believes her negative experience with her direct family has nothing to do with her being a woman. Danielle believes that whenever she is in Norway or any other country, she is not being judged because she is a tattooed woman because, yet again, she sees tattoos as more normalized today and especially for women who get tattooed. While these three women have received none to little negativity, Bianca appears to have experienced the most judgment because of her tattoos. Bianca has mentioned how her father and his side of the family have commented on her tattoos and have negative views of tattoos, and she also mentioned how her older brother has tattoos as well, but he does not receive the same amount of negative comments, and they are not as harsh as hers. I asked her if she thinks it is because she is a woman and he is a man; she believes it is true, but also because he does not live in the same city as the rest of the family, so that could also be a factor. Bianca also feels judged when her tattoos are visible at her job because of her gender.

The roles that Bianca and Danielle are expected to play because they are women influence their performances because they have to hide their self-expression to be accepted by their families. From all the data gathered, only these two women's experiences can be explained with Goffman's dramaturgical theory. They are forced to adhere to specific roles and to play characters on the frontstage so that they would be accepted in society and by others. The

expectation of women to be beautiful is not in line with how people view tattoos as not feminine and tough. These roles affect Bianca and Danielle, pushing them to hide their tattoos and their chosen sign vehicles. They do not have a choice but to show off their tattoos in private or when they deem a situation safe for them to do so.

I have to add that only one of the informants, Andrea, has expressed how her tattoos relate to her being a woman. She looks at tattoos as a way to take ownership of her body, as there is an expectation of women to look and behave in a certain way. She states:

For me, there is sort of like this reclamation of the skin [...] because you grow up as a woman in this world, and there is like this commodification of the female body [...]. There is a sort of claiming, I don't know, me claiming my body for myself and rejecting a sort of aspect of societal femininity with it.

As Kosut (2000) stated in her study about women's tattoos, how women getting something inherently masculine rejects the idea that women have to be feminine. They are reclaiming their bodies by getting tattoos; however, there is not enough data in my study to claim this statement is true. Kosut's study is relatively old, so that could point to the fact that today women do not get tattoos to reclaim their bodies or to reject femininity, and could be because tattoos are more accepted in general and more accepted to be used by women.

Even though not all informants have received any negativity or have very little, they all stated that they do not regret any of their tattoos. It would have been expected that some of the informants had some regrets, but all of them are happy with their choice of getting tattoos and are all planning on getting more. The informants are happy with how they present themselves, even though some of them experience judgment because of the tattoos, their tattoos are genuinely what they wish to do with their body, and that is to fill up their blank canvas or body as they have stated. Even though Bianca and Danielle do not have the choice every time to express themselves however they want, they still choose to get more tattoos, and that could be said to be admirable of them because it shows they want to do whatever makes them happy.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have used Goffman's dramaturgical theory to understand how women use tattoos to express themselves and their general experiences as tattooed women. I have added new insight into how women choose to express themselves and how their families and other people they are surrounded with see their tattoos. The data gathered is inconsistent because only half of the participants choose to and can express themselves whenever they want. However, the other half are pushed to adhere to society's roles on people, specifically on women, which forces them to hide their tattoos or self-expression and can only show them in specific situations. Women use tattoos in many ways to express themselves; it all depends on how the people around them react to their tattoos and their views. Unfortunately, not all the women in this study can freely show off their tattoos whenever they want, so they need to be aware of when and where they can do it. However, some are proud to show them off around family and friends, who will compliment and accept them no matter how they choose to express themselves. Comparing this study to other studies done before and that I have presented, there is still a stigma surrounding people with tattoos, and sometimes more precisely because they are women with tattoos. Women seem to be doing better in today's Western society than they have been doing in previous years. Still, there is a battle to fight towards letting people freely express themselves however and whenever they want. Even though women today might not get tattoos to make a statement about the expectations they receive from society to be feminine, they still experience judgment. The choice of focusing on gender was made to add more to the existing research on the topic of tattoos, and because the data that resulted from this study is inconsistent, some changes could have been made to get a better result. For example, I could have selected a bigger sample or chosen to interview both women and men to compare their experiences and see more clearly the difference between the two genders. Looking at this data, though, it could be possible that there would not be a difference between how tattooed men and women are treated in the near future.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Warm up questions

What do tattoos mean to you, in general?

When did you get your first tattoo?

- How many tattoos do you have?

When do you think you will stop getting tattoos?

Being a tattooed woman

What are your experiences of being a tattooed woman?

- Do you think that you're being judged more harshly because you're a woman with tattoos?

Using tattoos as self-expression: What do tattoos say and to whom?

What do YOUR tattoos mean to you?

- How do tattoos make you feel?
- Do your tattoos help you say something? / Do you make a statement with your tattoos?
- What statement?
- Do you feel like you stand out because of your tattoos in a positive way or negative way?
- Do you have visible or non-visible tattoos? Both?
- Do you have any private tattoos that you think people should not see?
- In the process before getting a tattoo, do you ever consider how visible the placement of that tattoo will be?
- Do you ever intentionally hide or show off your tattoos with clothing?
- When do you think it's important to have your tattoos visible?

Do you regret any of your tattoos?

- Why?
- Do they no longer reflect who you are?
- Do you have any tattoos removed or covered up?
- Would you ever remove or cover up a tattoo you don't like?

Advice

What would you recommend for a young woman who is planning to get her first tattoo?