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THE MARK OF THE SLUT

A SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE TATTOOED WOMAN

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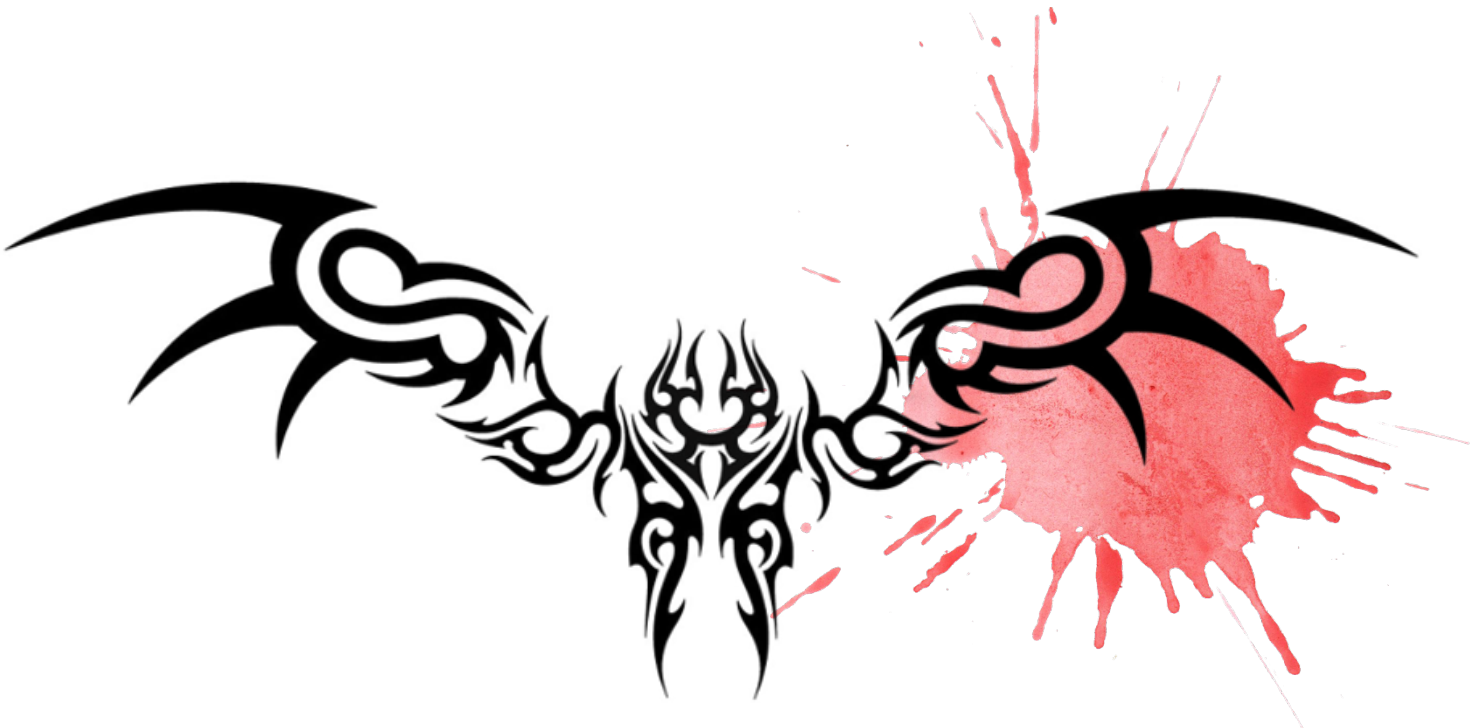

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Introduction and motivation

Tattoos have become just about as mainstream as dyeing your hair over the course of the past decade and with that evolution, lasering clinics have seen a boom in demand. Whereas tattoos used to be reserved for sailors, criminals, and circus performers, in today's society people of all societal classes, races, religions and genders sport some sort of ink; whether it be the businessman hiding a full back tattoo under his suit, the high schooler with a dainty infinity sign and swallows wrapped around her wrist or the gangbanger with multiple teardrops on his cheeks and gang symbols scattered across his body. Ink is a way of expressing creativity, individuality and, to some degree, affiliation to different parts of society. As such, tattooing went from being a stamp of deviancy to the cool new, personalised accessory. Or did it truly undergo this progression for everybody? We have probably all heard the term "tramp stamp" by 2021 and some have even adopted its baby sibling, the "skank flank" into their vocabulary by now. Most millennials at least came across the term "underboob" in the wake of superstar Rihanna's Egyptian inspired sternum tattoo in tribute to her late grandmother from 2012. These three terms cover tattoos, which are traditionally found on the female body; on a male body, the underboob is merely called a chest piece. A classic tribal tramp stamp is rarely found on a man's lower back anymore, probably as it was deemed to be a feminine tattoo at some point and a skank flank does not have a name if it is located on the rib cage of a man. During a time of wokeness, girl power and #MeToo, the tattooed women have been forgotten, it seems. As we raise our voices to spread awareness of and end sexual harassment in all aspects of society, the derogatory discourse surrounding feminine tattoos is still going strong and the thought of ending gender inequality while still using sexist slurs to describe a tattoo merely because it is on a woman's body seems absolutely ludicrous. Are tattooed women not worth the same basic respect as non-tattooed women or even tattooed men? And why does that same idea not apply to the countless men who express themselves through the art of tattooing?

This study sets out to investigate questions like the aforementioned and attempts to answer them utilizing several theories including the basic notion of biological versus cultural gender, the four waves of feminism, Judith Butler's thoughts on gender performativity as well as the more specialized theory on tattoos and consumer culture theory by scholars Maurice Patterson and Jonathan Schroeder. The study will be conducted using the diachronic perspective meaning that it will investigate the development in tattooing starting with the deep-rooted cultural practises of more or less primordial tribal societies and move forwards with the development tattooing went through up until today's Western cultural norms regarding tattoos as identity markers and a form of art. The analysis will consist of multiple examples of tattoos including those of ancient tribal cultures, the tattoos made and worn at the tentative beginnings of tattooing in the West, examples of the tattoos worn by world-famous celebrities during the 1990's and early 2000's when tattoos truly became popular as well as the tattoos of current celebrities, which may be perceived as problematic in the feminist view. This diachronic perspective provides the foundation of a thorough cultural analysis of how tattoo culture evolved and gives answers as to whether or not the view of tattooed women has actually changed much since the 1900's. This analysis will be followed by a discussion set out to uncover the built-in dualisms of tattooing in our current society: is it empowerment or is it actually self-harm? As well as the paradoxical aspects of tattoos being identity projects that also subsequently transform the body into an object for the external gaze. The discussion will also include and try to answer the question of whether tattoos are truly gendered in the sense of everyday discrimination with roots in religious norms and more conservative times that have long gone by. Through the aforementioned analysis subjects and discussion points, this study seeks to answer the thesis statement: *How does the tattooed female body reproduce problematic social positions in the white patriarchy of modern Western culture?*

Theories and Methodology

Feminism: A Quick Introduction

What is feminism? According to Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, feminism is "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim" ("Feminism"). Thus, it can be argued that feminism is a woman-centric notion qua the official definition. At least it used to be a woman-centric movement, which fought only for women's rights and not even all women at that. Thankfully, times have changed since the term feminism was invented during the 1800's and now a multitude of feminists world-wide identify more as equalists rather than pro-women. This notion will be discussed further in the next

paragraph, which sets out to investigate how feminism has developed over the course of four waves. However, to introduce feminism today, Judith Butler captures the current cultural incentive and struggle of feminism quite excellently in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*:

> In a culture in which the false universal of 'man' has for the most part been presupposed as coextensive with humanness itself, feminist theory has sought with success to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women. Yet, in this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category feminist run the risk of rendering visible a category, which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women. (523)

Furthermore, Butler discusses the notion of 'woman' at the centre of feminism in her book *Gender Trouble.* She argues that feminist theory was in need of a language to represent women accurately due to the fact that women's lives were misrepresented or not represented at all, which is a big political issue. Furthermore, there has been some disagreements regarding the very subject of women, which is no longer understood in stable terms and as such, it destabilizes the foundation of political representation on which it stands. Certain criteria must be met in order to gain representation and seeing as 'woman' is no longer a static subject with clear definitions, some criteria may not actually be met ("Gender Trouble" 2). Butler moves on to discuss how according to Foucault the juridical system actually produces its own subjects through regulation of political life by limitation, prohibition, control and regulation of those related to the particular political structure. By doing so, the subjects will be defined by the very structures in which they were reproduced. In context, women are reproduced in a political system, which is supposed to provide emancipation while it also oppresses the same women, thus, making feminism a lost cause (2-3). This political dualism, according to Butler, is something feminist critique must seek to understand (4). Another issue is how 'women' is used as a denominator to indicate a common identity, as 'woman' is never the only thing a person can be. Butler elaborates: "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (4). As such, a woman is never just a woman, but much more and it is simply impossible to remove gender from the intersectionality of the culture and politics in which gender was reproduced. This idea that there exists some common identity across cultures also assumes that there is a universal patriarchy at play, which completely neglects the fact that gender is subject to cultural contexts. This notion

opens a different issue for feminism; the appropriation of non-Western cultures to fit into a Western idea of oppression (“Gender Trouble” 5).

Feminism is undeniably a theme in many people’s lives at the moment during the #MeToo-movement as well as the recent *Text Me When You Get Home* campaign launched in England after the young woman Sarah Everard was murdered while walking through the streets of London alone at night. However, feminism is not only a theme in the wake of tragedies; feminism has grown to be omnipresent in popular culture, which is discussed by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley in the book *Feminism in Popular Culture.* The idea of feminism and popular culture being intertwined provides a basis for what popular culture can tell us about feminism rather than just what feminism can tell us about popular culture. It is the notion that there is a generation who did not see the Redstockings protest, but rather grew up within feminism’s grip on popular contemporary culture (Hollows and Moseley 1-2). Hollows and Moseley argue that the need to investigate feminism in popular culture stems from the second wave feminism during the 1960’s and 70’s during which feminism was considered to be a movement that stood opposite of dominant culture and challenged hegemonic ideas about gender. This opposition defined and united second wavers as hostile towards the popular. An example of this being how women were misrepresented both into stereotypical bodily ideals as well as what they were expected to act like and strive for in life. This misrepresentation was opposed by feminists who in turn took to creating documentaries depicting the stories of real women and thus offering a channel for representation (3-4). After the second wave, some young women refused to label themselves feminists and thus opened a new way of thinking in feminist terms (8-9). Women were free to agree with some aspects of feminist theory and disagree with others. An example given is how black female rappers agreed with some aspects of feminism but were vary of the notions of sisterhood and the idea of sexual politics coming before their racial battles (9). This resistance coming from third wave feminists caused some tension between second wavers and the new generation, which will be further discussed in the following paragraph, which goes into detail on the history of feminism.

The Four Waves of Feminism

Before any analysis within the field of gender studies comes an in-depth discussion on the four waves of feminism. The actual number of waves have long been a subject of discussion, as some believe that there are three waves, and some believe that we are currently amidst the fourth wave of feminism. The fourth wave will, however, be included in this study, as the study sets out to investigate the cultural implications of tattooed female bodies during the ongoing fourth wave in

particular. Naturally, the practice of tattooing started centuries before the birth of feminism as we know it today but seeing as tattooing is more popular than ever in the Western world and this study is set in a contemporary political environment, the modern feminist approach will be applied to ancient tattoos in order to streamline the study. Unlike the ancient art of tattooing, modern feminism is less than 200 years old and officially began with the first wave in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention where hundreds of people, mostly women and some men, gathered to rally for women's rights on invitation by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Rampton 1-3). The first wave was heavily influenced by the suffrage movement and thus the main goal was for women to attain political power through the right to vote (Cavanaugh); a goal that was not met until August 18, 1920 with the implementation of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution ("Women's Suffrage"). During the first wave, feminist initially worked alongside the temperance and abolitionist movements, but ultimately split up due to disagreements in the basic ideologies at the core of the movements.

The second wave of feminism began in the 1960's in the wake of World War II and continued into the 1990's. During this wave, feminists were occupied with sexuality and reproductive issues as well as women's position in the workplace from which women were involuntarily sent home when the war ended, and men returned from the battlefields. During the second wave a multitude of other movements such as the black civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam war movements, Gay and Lesbian movements and many more, and as a result, feminists created women-only organisations as their way of ensuring that their messages would not drown in those of movements equally as important as feminism (Rampton 3). In spite of the fact that feminists felt the need to separate themselves from movements such as the Black Civil Rights Movement, the second wave attracted women of colour, who believed that "Women's struggle is class struggle" (Rampton 4). As such, the second wave was driven by a diverse host of women whereas the first wave was mainly led by white, middle class women. This new diversity lent more credibility to feminism, which was focused on the fact that race, class and gender are all related in regard to oppression (4). During the second wave, the Redstockings staged a protest against beauty pageants during which they trashed what they thought to be "oppressive artifacts" such as girdles, bras, high heels and make-up as a means of rising above the traditional view of women as submissive to the patriarchy (3). Finally, it is important to note that it was during the second wave that sex and gender were differentiated as respectively biological and cultural.

The third wave began in the 1990's and continued up until the early 2000's. This wave destabilized notions of body, gender, sexuality, heteronormativity, and universal womanhood

(Rampton 4). The very lipstick high heels and bras that the Redstocking trashed for being oppressive, were reclaimed during this wave, as the notion that "it's possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time" became an expression of the new position of feminism (4). Furthermore, women proceeded to twist the discourse and appeared stronger and more empowered rather than victims, as they redefined what feminine beauty is and thus defined themselves as subjects rather than sexualized objects of the patriarchy. Derogatory terms such as "bitch" and "slut" were also redefined, as women reappropriated them for their own in order to disarm the people who used these slurs as weapons in their sexist agenda (4). This period of girl power still relied somewhat on the women-only space, only now it had moved into cyberspace with the rise of electronic magazines, or E-zines. The rise of the web expanded the reach of feminism, and gave users opportunity to cross gender boundaries, as the web is disembodied. Thus, the notion of gender was destabilized, which gave way to creative thought and experimentation (4-5). During this wave, feminist shunned the term "feminist", as it was found to be "limiting and exclusionary" (5), which is quite descriptive of how inclusive third wave feminism was. This is further underscored in the quote: "Its transversal politics means that differences such as those of ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc. are celebrated and recognized as dynamic, situational and provisional" (Rampton 5). Third wave feminism truly challenged the boundaries of gender discourse in reappropriating sexist slurs, clothing, and beauty paraphernalia as well as the notions of feminism itself.

The fourth wave is still ongoing and as such, it is difficult to give a satisfactory account of which issues are going to define this era of feminism. However, the events of recent years are a good indication of what it will be remembered for. Themes of rape culture, body shaming and body positivity as well as sexual harassment and assault come to mind. Rampton discusses how silent feminism has become in recent years, which might be perceived as feminism having failed during its earlier waves and how modern women at some point chose careers and the atomic self over gender equality (Rampton 5). This, however, is not the case according to Rampton who remarks how much feminism has accomplished and how the lull in activity was more likely due to the successes rather than the failures of feminism and an effective smear campaign against feminism during the 1990's, which painted a picture of feminist as male-bashing extremists (5). Rampton dives into a brief discussion of how feminism moved into the world of academia and rather than activists produced theorists during the second wave (6). During the fourth wave, feminism is retreating from academia and moving back into the lived world, as issues from the earlier stages are resurfacing in politics; issues of rape, abuse, violence slut-shaming, unequal pay, body shaming and

underrepresentation. Talking about these issues is no longer considered extreme and the so-called "femi-nazi" stereotype seems to have died down (6-7). Fourth wavers' main issue with the word "feminism" is how exclusionary it is: the word itself adheres to assumptions of a gender binary and creates the feeling of "women only" while feminism has evolved to encompass all genders (Rampton 7). Unlike their predecessors, fourth wavers speak in terms of intersectionality, which has pushed feminism to be part of a much larger consciousness of oppression, as women's struggles cannot be understood in a context of other groups' marginalization (7). Rampton finishes her account of the fourth wave by stating: "The beauty of the fourth wave is that there is a place in it for all - together" (Rampton 7), which underscores how feminism does not only apply to a certain kind of women, but fights for gender equality. Some might question the continued need for feminism with the arguments that girls have access to the same level of education as boys, that women hold positions of leadership much like men, has the right to bodily autonomy and access to contraceptives and abortions if need be, that academia is permeated by gender studies and feminist theory and that people are much more aware of gender equality than when feminism was born during the 1800's. However, we are never finished much like Rampton accounted for; in 2021 the access to abortions is limited in several states in the US. Girls are sent home from high school for wearing tank tops in the sweltering summer heat. Women are not paid the same as their male colleagues. And most shockingly, a US presidential candidate was elected president in spite of publicly known sexist remarks about women. Problems like these warrant the continued efforts of feminism.

Judith Butler on Gender and Body

Within the field of gender studies, it is pertinent to be able to differentiate sex and gender. According to Judith Butler, philosopher and prominent gender theorist, sex is to be understood as the anatomically distinct and factual parts of the female body, whereas gender is defined as the cultural meanings and forms that the female bodies acquire ("Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex" 35). It is this segregation of body and gender, which has cleared the way for notions of gender performativity. In Judith Butler's article, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, she discusses the notion of gender as an act. Butler takes her starting point in notions of acts from the field of philosophy and the famed quote by Simone de Beauvoir "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 519), which establish how gender is not a static identity or even a space of agency. Rather, gender is an identity, which is construed through a

"stylized repetition of acts" and the body. As such, gender is the way in which bodily gestures and movements, also known as constituting acts, create the illusion of a gendered self ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 519). These constituting acts are understood by Butler to be not only constituting the identity of the actor but constituting the identity to be a mere illusion. As mentioned, Butler works with the notion that gender identity is a performance, which is propelled by taboo and social sanctions (520). Butler quotes anthropologist Victor Turner who states that gender as an act of repetition is also a re-enactment and re-experiencing a set of meanings, which are already established. Even though the act is carried out by individuals, it becomes public as well by the bodies of the individuals adhering to gendered modes (526).

In separating the notions of sex and gender, the idea that women's experiences are determined by some physiological factors were questioned by feminist theorists. Butler quotes Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the body in which he takes issue with these notions of bodily experiences and claims the body to be a historical idea and not a natural species, which is congruent with the aforementioned quote by Simone de Beauvoir ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 520). In this view, the body is not denied the existence of its natural dimensions, but these dimensions are conceived to be separate from the processes in which the body comes to bear cultural meanings. As such, the body is considered to be an active process of embodying both cultural and historical possibilities. In phenomenological theory of constitution, the notion of acts must be split in two in order to describe the gendered body; that which constitutes meaning and that which meaning is performed through ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 521). In other words, the body bears the cultural meanings and also expresses these cultural meanings through the aforementioned repeated stylized acts. The body as a historical idea or situation is an expression of the body being a "manner of doing, dramatizing and reproducing a historical situation" (521). To perform gender manifests as what Sartre would refer to as a style. This style can never be completely self-made, but is also saturated with history, which limits the possibilities of the style. Gender is an embodied style, which is both intentional and performative ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 521-522). To become a gender, woman in this case, means to have conformed the body to fit into the historical idea of a woman and embody the cultural signs associated with women. To perform gender is also a tactic of survival, as those who fail to do their gender will oftentimes face some sort of social punishment. However, gender is not a fact; gender is created in its own image meaning that without the constituting acts associated with gender, there would be no such thing as gender at all ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 522). Now, the sexed

body and the cultural notion of gender are largely entangled in one another as implied in stating how the body is subject to historical conventions. As such, the distinction between sex and gender, which seems quite simple going by the definition that was mentioned, become more a bit more intricate, as gender is perceived to be the cultural significance, which the body assumes through constituting acts and that this significance is predetermined by the cultural perception of the aforementioned acts. In this cultural view sex and gender seem impossible to separate ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 523-524).

Not only are the notions of body and gender interwoven, so are the personal and political aspects of gender itself according to Butler. The personal is political when it comes to the interests of feminism such as gender. Political and cultural structures are reproduced through repeated individual acts, which may seem too small to have an impact, but seeing as the small acts are performed by multiples, they come to constitute the cultural practices. Butler sums this up in saying "My situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 522). As such, it is not only the body that is a historical situation, which is moving within given possibilities and comes to be known as its gendered appearance. Butler argues that this gendering of the body happens through a series of acts that have been and continue to be revised through time (522-523). Gender is reproduced largely on a political scale when it comes to women's struggles and wins, which was discussed in the paragraphs regarding the four waves of feminism, but the reproduction of gender identity is also occurring in a much more mundane manner. This being how we act our body in relation to deep-rooted cultural expectations of gender norms. These gender norms create what Butler refers to as a peculiar phenomenon of a natural sexes to exist in a binary relation to one another ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 524). Butler continues this string of thought by quoting how Foucault pointed out that the association between a natural sex and a natural attraction to the opposite gender is essentially nothing more than the result of cultural constructs that aide basic reproduction as thus discredits the notion of sexed bodies existing in a binary relationship. Butler names this a "system of compulsory heterosexuality" and argues that it is upheld by the cultivation of sexed bodies into natural appearances and attractions (524).

As mentioned, the body is regarded to be an instrument with which the individual can enact given historical possibilities, and this provides a ground of understanding how cultural conventions are embodied and acted within a structure of systemic oppression of women. However, returning to

the socio-political aspect of body and gender, individual acts do work to uphold the very system of oppression, but the act alone cannot be viewed as the sole cause of oppression. Butler argues that there are "social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 525). When it comes to gender, the act is shared, as it is shaped by certain social sanctions and doing it wrong can lead to punishment. The act of gender has been rehearsed many times before the actor stepped foot on stage and even though different families practice gender acts differently, they are inclined to follow the gender conventions of their specific culture rather than reinvent the notion of gender itself (525-526). Gender as a public action can become problematic when the gendered body does not act the part it has been given in its culturally determined setting governed by pre-set directives, which can lead to social sanction in the lived world. Butler uses the example of a transgender person who might be awarded with a standing ovation for their performance in a theatrical setting, but in real life they might be met with a drastically different reaction. This is due to the fact that in the theatre, we are able to dismiss the reality of what we see and in doing so protect our existing ontological presumptions of gender arrangements (526-527). In the lived world, these presumptions are challenged, which might lead to mental discomfort and cognitive dissonance in the person meeting the transgender person, as they transcend the cultural limits of gender and body as well as the distinction between appearance and reality ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 527). This is highly relevant to this study, as tattooed women once transcended the limits of the culturally feminine body and were faced with social sanction. This is still true today even though tattoos have become an established part of society and youth culture.

Patterson and Schroeder: Consumer Culture Theory and Tattoos

In their essay, *Borderlines: Tattoos, Skin, and Consumer Culture Theory,* Maurice Patterson and Jonathan Schroeder dissect the relationship between consumer culture theory and tattoos using multiple different theorists. Patterson and Schroeder utilize three different skin metaphors in order to provide a deeper understanding of body projects such as tattooing, which will provide a deeper understanding and work well with the notions of body as well as cultural gender by Judith Butler that has been discussed already. Patterson and Schroeder's main focus is the heavily tattooed female body, but their essay lends an understanding of the cultural implications any degree of tattooing might have for a woman in today's Western society. The aspect of consumer culture theory provides a possible explanation as to how tattoos and other body modifications, which were

traditionally thought to be barbaric and belonged to lesser developed tribal cultures, became an integrated part of the Western culture.

Identity is the prime concern with consumer culture theory, but rather than being a one-sided concern, it is split into two, which are "consumers as postmodern fragmented selves and consumers as seekers of a coherent sense of self" (Patterson and Schroeder 2). The argument here is that the consumer as postmodern fragmented selves represent multiple temporary attachments, which are sometimes even made to contradictory subjects. On the other hand, consumers seeking a coherent sense of selves means that the individual is not bound to conforming to just one experience of being. This latter view appeals to the claim of consumer culture theory that is how the marketplace lends a hand in creating identities. This is done as the marketplace offers a multitude of commodities as well as so-called symbolic resources to be incorporated into the individual's personal identity as well as their communal identity, which is increasingly created through common interest of consumption (2). Regarding the notions of identity and consumer culture theory, it is pertinent to underscore three arguments. First, identities are not static, or a given but are created by the individual themself. Secondly, the individual is responsible for their identity. Third is the notion that communication of identities to others as well as their interpretation are relatively unproblematic (2-3).

Patterson and Schroeder proceed to account for the importance and cultural meaning of our skin, which "reflects the dynamic relationship between inside and outside, self and society, between personal identity projects and marketplace cultures. It represents the meeting place of structure and agency; a primary site for the inscription of ideology and a text upon which individuals write their own stories" (4). This puts emphasis on the importance the skin holds in regard to creating an identity, as it can be considered the only thing separating the individual from the outside world. In this view, it becomes possible for others to judge character by a mere glance at the skin. This is highly problematic, as tattoos are still perceived as "a social marking that, if not inscribed on the bodies of deviants, then constitutes a deviant practice of the bodies of individuals" (Patterson and Schroeder 4) even though the art of tattooing has become rather conventional within all layers of society in recent years. There are multiple possible explanations to this, but one of those is that tattoos act as an extension of the self for the outside world to see (5). This explanation is congruent with the aforementioned importance skin holds in creating an identity; the tattoo is an embodiment of the identity.

As for feminine identity and tattoos, Patterson and Schroeder quote two different studies, the first claiming that women tend to limit themselves to small, personal tattoos hidden away in places that are not usually visible to the outside world (5). This claim, however, is challenged by Goulding and Follett with the notion that heavily tattooed women use their tattoos to differentiate themselves from the masses and to challenge gender stereotypes by engaging in body projects that are not traditionally considered feminine (6). By doing so these women are creating their identity outside of what is considered the norm for women. Exactly this notion of traditional femininity and the fact that society is gender stereotyping the act of tattooing is at the core of the societal issues that this study will investigate. Furthermore, it is claimed that upwards of 60% of the people getting tattoos are women, and that this infiltration may be a sign that women are trying to reclaim their bodies (Patterson and Schroeder 8). In spite of this, Patterson and Schroeder account for the fact that the act of tattooing has been compared to sexual intercourse: "The very process of tattooing is essentially sexual. There are the long, sharp needles. There is the liquid poured into the pricked skin. There are the two participants of the act, one active, the other passive. There is the curious marriage of pleasure and pain" (11). To emphasize this notion, they state that just the sight of tattoos may result in interpretations of the tattooed individual as a sexual subject. This notion is supported by the fact that cultural truisms determine how a woman's body is viewed and that tattoos are able to magnify this view: "When a woman's body is a sex object, a tattooed woman's body is a lascivious sex object; when a woman's body is nature, a tattooed woman's body is primitive; when a woman's body is spectacle, a tattooed woman's body is a show" (14-15). In this view, a tattooed female body may be perceived to be something grotesque, as it demands attention from others while also challenging the cultural body as a phenomenon. The tattooed female body challenges the culturally set distinctions between masculine and feminine (Patterson and Schroeder15). This paragraph truly underlines the ambiguity revolving the tattooed body; on one hand, tattoos are way of women reclaiming their bodies and portraying their identity and on the other hand, tattoos are yet another way of further sexualising the already sexualised female body and in a way diminish the individual inside that cultural body.

As mentioned, there is an association between tattoos and deviancy, which lends credibility to the art of tattooing as a form of resistance. Tattooed women in particular are deviating from the set norms of personal appearance consistent with the previous claim of heavily tattooed women challenging gender stereotypes. Tattoos reshape the body and thus pushes the individual into a limbo between being a subject and being an object (Patterson and Schroeder 4), as the tattoos are

personal identity projects, but at the same time the tattoos themselves transform the body into an object for the external gaze (7). This submission to the external gaze becomes problematic, as the skin is considered to be an embodied form of a visual curriculum vitae, which is also permeated by culture in a way that bodies are sorted into different categories, which are socially significant (13). Due to the fact that skin is considered to be a reflection of the moral character inside the body, tattooed women are more likely to be considered deviant than women with no tattoos. This proves how unreliable the notion of skin as a projection surface of character truly is, as any and all meaning, which is projected onto skin is cultural and learned (Patterson and Schroeder14). Thus, the idea that tattooed people are deviants actually only serves to uphold the sense of what is normal, in this case the normal is non-tattooed skin, rather than give any substantial meaning to the discussions regarding tattooed women (16).

Patterson and Schroeder quote Joy and Venkatesh stating that contemporary consumer culture theory has engulfed body and skin in a paradigm of plasticity, which allows the "creation of bodies as sign systems, texts, narratives, rendered meaningful and integrated into forms capable of being read" (17). In this view, skin can be changed to reflect a desired appearance in order with the notion of skin as a projection surface for identity. However, there are three main issues within such conceptualisations of body projects; the first being how it disregards access to resources and thus, recreates class distinctions (17) by assuming everyone has access to the same amount of wealth needed for tattoos, the same necessities for personal hygiene, a healthy diet, etc. Second, body projects are weighed down by apprehensions, as marketplace ideologies regarding the skin and body vary depending on gender, class and ethnicity. Thus, the individual is always at risk of getting it wrong, which in the worst-case scenario can cause their efforts to be read back onto them and accuse them of bad morals, bad choice, failure to be reflective or even bad culture (Patterson and Schroeder 18). Third, body projects are currently framed to reproduce the mind/body dualism, which regards the body as a mere instrument for the mind to operate. Budgeon is quoted to urge us to view the body as an event rather than an object, as "representation of bodies become embodied by real people" (18). This embodiment of ideologies regarding femininity and masculinity are what fuels the drive of hegemonic masculinity and its oppression of women, as men pursue the masculine strength and women pursue the ideal of a skinny, weaker body, women actually end up fulfilling the stereotype of being the weaker sex and thus, the focus needs to shift from asking what bodies as objects mean, to asking what bodies as events can do (18-19). Patterson and Schroeder continue to reiterate how tattoos as identity projects are a marketed product by stating that "a key strategy of

contemporary marketing is to create a compelling identity for products and services by affiliating with some aspect of personal or group identity" (20). As such, the body and skin is reduced to an object that can be used to promote an ideal of the good life through a combination of the body, skin and identity ordered into sexualised images (Patterson and Schroeder 20). In this view, tattoos become emblems that denote identity, agency and sometimes deviancy within social and cultural arenas based on the cultural histories of skin, sexuality, and resistance (21). As such, in the view of Patterson and Schroeder, the human skin reflects tensions in culture between liberation and celebration on one side and repression and conformity on the other. This view of skin gives way to the notion that rather than write texts, we write our own identities, which are not static seeing as they are subject to the gaze and discourse of others creating opportunity for misplacement into the category of deviancy (Patterson and Schroeder 21). Skin is both the signifier, as the tattoos are imprinted into the skin, as well as the signified due to cultural norms that the skin inadvertently reflects.

Les Back: The Art of Listening

In Les Back's book *The Art of Listening,* he investigates how we as a society can better ourselves at listening to each other's stories rather than speaking ourselves. One way of doing so is listening to what is told beyond sound. As Patterson and Schroeder uncovered, tattoos communicate both silently and incredibly loudly on the bearer's behalf whether they wish to or not. Les Back taps into quite a lot of the same notions regarding tattoos as Patterson and Schroeder, and the first he accounts for is the negative stigma surrounding tattoos in the Western world. Due to the Polynesian origin of tattooing, tattoos are associated with what Back refers to as "the ethnic Other" (Back 72) and due to the fact that sailors brought the art of tattooing to the West, namely Europe, they are also associated with "the class Other." This "class Other" springs from the fact that to the working-class, tattoos have created a means of reclaiming and aestheticizing the body, but it also objectifies the body and subject it to stigmatisation from the surrounding society (72). Back furthermore accounts for the act of getting a tattoo as a moment of crossing boundaries, as external become internal and vice versa. The tattoo left behind can thus be read through a range of metaphors, which Patterson and Schroeder have largely accounted for, but one significant metaphor being that of agency and control (73). However, there are examples in history of tattooing being used in order to create the exact opposite effect to agency and control, which is worth noting. Back mentions the prisoners' numbers, which were tattooed on the arms of Jewish prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps. These tattoos were used as a means of regulation and control, which survivors were forced to wear

for the rest of their lives as a cruel reminder of what they endured. Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi is quoted to have recounted "I felt the tattooed number on my arm burning like a sore," as he walked through Germany post liberation (74). The stigmatisation that Primo Levi felt is still present in modern society and can stem from multiple different stereotypes based on socioeconomic status or gender. Back accounts for prison tattooing as a way for the prisoners to regain control of their incarcerated bodies while possibly reminiscing about their lives on the outside of the walls. Oftentimes prisoners will decorate themselves with gang tattoos, which is a way of signifying belonging and agency to the bearer. However, to the outside world gang tattoos become a sign of deviancy, violence, and danger, which might cause disgust in the respectable layers of society and emphasise the class differences that tattoos have come to represent. Another example Back brings is how tattooed working-class women have been associated with sexual deviancy, prostitution, and crime, which is congruent with the notions of Patterson and Schroeder (74-75).

Roland Barthes' Mythologies

The late French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes defines myths as a type of speech. However, myth is not any type of speech, but rather a mode of signification also referred to as a form (Barthes 107). Thus, myth is not defined by its message, but how the message is delivered through speech whether that type of speech consists of writing or visual representations such as photographs, films, sports, shows, etc. (108). Barthes argues that myth cannot be defined by its object nor its material, as any material can carry meaning. The material, which constitutes mythical speech, has already been prepared and made suitable to carry its meaning and thus any object can become speech if only they mean something (108-109). Barthes notes that mythical speech is not to be confused with language, as it belongs in the category, he calls semiology (109). Semiology, or semiotics, was founded by Ferdinand de Saussure and is defined as "science of forms, since it studies signification apart from their content" (110). Semiotics make use of the important terms signifier and signified as well as the sign. Barthes exemplifies the relation between the three terms with a black pebble. Alone the pebble is an empty signifier, but as it is laden with some definite signified it becomes a sign (Barthes 111-112). To put this notion in the context of this study, any given tattoo, no matter what it depicts, starts out as an empty signifier. However, most tattoos are laden with meaning, or signified, of some sort both by the wearer of the tattoo and the external onlooker and thus, it becomes a sign. Now as accounted for by Patterson and Schroeder in their discussions about tattoos and deviancy, there might be a discrepancy in the signified between the wearer and the onlooker, which will render the resulting sign vastly different depending on context.

This study relies on semiotics, as the analysis subjects are visual representations, which are to be read and decoded in their cultural context.

Analysis

According to Les Back, the most popular account for how tattooing came to the West is that it was brought back to Europe with the explorers during the eighteenth century, as Polynesia and the South Pacific were explored. Captain James Cook is to thank for the fact that the West learnt the word tattoo, which is appropriated from the Polynesian "tatu" or "tatau" meaning mark or strike (Back 71-72). However, tattooing was not reserved for the Polynesian tribes and there are multiple accounts of tattoos being used as markers for property rights among Greeks, Romans, and Celts. Furthermore, there is a link between tattooing and pilgrimage, as early modern pilgrims of Palestine wore tattoos as evidence of their sacred travels (72). Going back even further, there have been found several Egyptian mummies adorned with tattoos over the years and interestingly, many of them are female. In an interview with Smithsonian Magazine, Joann Fletcher, archaeological research fellow with the University of York at the time, accounts for several findings of ancient Egyptian mummies with tattoos. Interestingly, the tattooed mummies were first dismissed by male excavators as being of lesser standing, sometimes described as dancing girls (Lineberry). However, this assumption was not true, as the mummies were buried in an exclusive location and one of them, assumed by aforementioned male excavators to be a royal concubine, turned out to be Amunet, a high-status priestess. This is extremely interesting, and highly relevant to this particular study, as the male excavators let their contemporary prejudice surrounding tattooed women cloud the importance of the finds and even diminish these women millennia post-mortem solely based on their tattoos, which is congruent with Patterson and Schroeder's findings of tattoos shrouding women in stereotypes of promiscuity. This projection of cultural values makes Fletcher's accounts even more bizarre, as it would seem obvious not to mix contemporary, most likely Western, values with those of ancient Egypt even back in 1923 when Amunet was discovered (Mifflin 34). It appears that the limits of the cultural female body from the West is so ingrained into our collective memory that it becomes difficult to discern between the cultural values at play. Joann Fletcher argues in the interview that she is a firm believer in the fact that the ancient Egyptian women used their tattoos as a form of permanent amulet to protect them during pregnancy and childbirth. She bases this on the placement of the tattoos across the abdomen, breasts and top of the thighs in conjunction with the designs that included depictions of deity Bes, who was the protector of women

in childbirth. Held together these facts provide an explanation as to why tattooing was reserved for women in ancient Egypt (Lineberry).

The Cultural Tattooing That Saved Lives

The ancient Egyptian mummies are a good example of how cultural practises and values are extremely important when it comes to tattooing. Another example of this is found on the small Indonesian island of West Timor, in the regency of Malaka, but they are in dwindling numbers. In December 2018, VICE Asia published a short documentary portraying the remaining women who used tattooing to save themselves from sexual slavery during World War II. As the Japanese Imperial Army occupied countries across Asia, the soldiers would capture women to serve as so-called comfort women, a glorified term for forced prostitution. A number of women found out how to use the Japanese soldiers' apparent respect for married women against them and thus indulged in the cultural practice of tattooing women heavily once they were married and it worked. The Japanese soldiers avoided the tattooed women of Malaka who in turn avoided a lifetime of sexual slavery in Japan and lived to tell their stories (VICE Asia). Back during the times of colonization tattooing became a tactic of survival, but unlike the embodied identity projects that tattoos are in today's Western societies, the tattoos of the Malakan women represented marriage; a sign that the woman belonged to a man. Naturally, this brings on the question of whether the Japanese soldiers actually respected married women or simply respected the imaginary man. This is a commonly known tactic among young women in the West to ward off unwanted attention from men who apparently, in some cases, find it easier to respect a man, who is not present, than it is to respect the woman in front of them saying no. Is this a piece of evidence of how little women's rights have actually evolved in everyday life? Unlike the notions of Patterson and Schroeder, the Malakan women's tattoos did not deem them to be deviant or promiscuous. The tattoos were not the emblems of sexual objects; quite the contrary, the tattoos demanded respect, which is the exact opposite of the effect tattoos on women have in Western societies. Thus, the tattooed Malakan women prove how important the cultural context truly is for discussions related to any form of cultural practises, traditions, and norms like this study.

Another significant and fascinating aspect of the Malakan women's history is how the tradition, which saved the women, is dying out with them. When interviewed as to why, the women themselves explain that since Timor is no longer colonized and no one is coming to kidnap them, the younger generations are not willing to endure the pain of tattooing to showcase their marital status and carry the tradition onwards (VICE Asia). The women explain how this progression

makes them sad and how they miss the tradition, which originated before they were born themselves. This is in accordance with Patterson and Schroeder's idea of tattoos being emblems of a cultural identity that the women are witnessing die out causing distress. Politically, the explanation is that the authoritarian regime of General Suharto deemed tattoos to be the emblems of criminals like it is the case in many Western cultures as well. As such, the tattoos that were once testimonials to women's marital status and, by virtue of that, incorruptibility had now become the exact opposite. This is another fascinating example of how cultural contexts change the significance of tattoos and proves how women's bodies are at the mercy of contemporary political trends. What is also interesting is that the village in which the tattooed women live, Uma Toos, is actually a matrilineal society meaning that women are more influential in how family matters such as kinship and inheritances are arranged. In the words of VICE host Kathleen Malay, "Here, the women have all the power and control of each families' wealth" (VICE Asia). It does seem rather unlikely that women in a position of power would be as affected by stereotypes due to culturally rooted bodily modifications as women are in the West. It appears that the Malakan women are in a unique position of bodily freedom but refuse to use it due to the pain of getting a tattoo done. Kathleen interviews a young woman who asks the rhetorical question, "why would we hurt ourselves just to show we're taken?" It is a reasonable argument as to why the tradition vanished alongside the older generations, as today's Western societies are generally more liberated from archaic traditions and cultural norms. Women worldwide should be able to have some bodily autonomy regardless of culture, and as such, the young Malakan women are part of this positive progression towards a world where women and their bodies are truly liberated.

Problematic Women's Tattoos in Popular Culture

Fortunately, tattoos are not necessarily used to exhibit women's marital status in the West. Here, tattoos are used as embodied identity projects demonstrating different aspects of peoples' lives such as family and personal history, religion, sexuality, and even political standpoints. Some tattoos are created for their beauty alone and carry no deeper significance while others are laden with deep-rooted meaning. As fun and personalised tattoos as body projects are supposed to be, sometimes they become just as problematic. Not all tattoos are created equal and especially certain tattoos on women are problematic for different reasons. Three examples of problematic tattoos as well as two examples of women challenging the stereotypes will be investigated in the following paragraphs.

The Tramp Stamp

Considered to be one of our time's greatest sex symbols, Angelina Jolie actually has one of the most stigmatised feminine tattoos, the so-called tramp stamp (China Daily) among multiple other tattoos. The tramp stamp is the first example of a problematic tattoo, as the term spread like wildfire during the 2000's and has stayed in our vocabulary since then. Looking at the term discursively, the word tramp denotes sexual promiscuity, which is frowned upon in patriarchal societies. The word stamp carries some negative connotations in this particular context. Usually, stamps are applied to inanimate objects in order to define or categorise said item. In this view, the term tramp stamp indicates that women with this particular type of tattoo are mere objects that have been marked and put into a distasteful and troublesome societal category. The placement of the tramp stamp tattoo on the lower back is not necessarily publicly accessible so to speak. While low rise jeans, cropped tops and whale tails were all the rage on the 2000's red carpet, fashion is ever changing, and it is no longer as fashionable to show off the lower back area. Then why are lower back tattoos still considered to be the epitome of sluttiness and stupidity? The placement of the tattoo, when visible, does direct the gaze towards the woman's bottom, an area of the body that is subject to extreme sexualisation even without a lower back tattoo to attract the eyes. Some will further argue that the lower back is an erotic body part due to the spine being an erogenous zone. The answer to the question of tramp stamps and stereotypes are more likely to be found in cultural traditions regarding the body than in erogenous zones. The lower back tattoo is a symptom of the historical limits in which the female body is permitted to act in Western culture. However, this seems to challenge Merleau-Ponty's claims that the historical body comes to bear cultural meaning regardless of its natural dimensions. Thus, it appears that women's freedom and bodily autonomy is largely predetermined by the natural dimensions of the female body itself. This combined with Patterson and Schroeder's findings that tattoos push women's bodies into being subject to the external gaze and that women's tattoos, regardless of placement, provoke associations to the woman being a sexual object truly underscores how tattoos work as an amplifier for pre-existing systemic sexism.

In her essay for Racked, Chiara Gabriel discusses the social implications that women with lower back tattoos face. She paints a vivid imagery at the very beginning by stating, "I didn't become a whore in high school. It happened my first year of college, in a tattoo parlour a few blocks off campus. That's where I got my tramp stamp" (Gabriel "Don't Call It a Tramp Stamp"). Gabriel states that at the time of getting her tattoo, she had no idea that it would deem her a slut, as

popular culture would demand years later. She accounts for other women in their thirties with lower back tattoos who hide them away in shame. One is her friend, who states that she quickly started disliking her lower back tattoo. Not because it was unoriginal or ugly, but "... it became sexualized, implied some sort of promiscuousness" (Gabriel). This is echoed later in the essay as Gabriel quotes Nicole Richie who also struggled with her lower back tattoo: "It just means a certain thing and I just don't want to be a part of that group." Thus, women with lower back tattoos feel the sexual stigma in real life, but where did it come from? According to Margot Mifflin, women's tattoos have always been more scandalous than men's' tattoos, as 19th century tattooed women, who often made a living by showcasing their ink in freak shows, had to bare their skin in order to show off their tattoos (Mifflin 18). By doing so these women broke the social rule that "women should be pure, that their bodies should be concealed and controlled, and that ladies should not express their own desires, which is implicit in the very act of permanently marking the skin with imagery that reflects individual tastes" (Heller). So, is the public hostility towards the lower back tattoo actually a remnant of bygone times during which women were expected to act prim and proper? It is more than possible that we still rely on the cultural norms that our society was built upon and this is the explanation as to why society still police women's bodies through social punishments such as shame and alienation. Traditionally, the tattooed 19th century women did act their gender completely wrong when they showed off their bodies for money in the freak shows, but due to the setting they did not face any real punishment; they were a part of the freak show after all. The lower back tattoo may have achieved its poor reputation from archaic gender norms, maybe women with the tattoo acted in a certain way to taint the tattoo or maybe it is just an example of how the patriarchy scrutinise women's bodies in order to find new ways of sexually diminishing it as a whole. Either way, it has not been able to shed its name and reputation, nor has it come back into fashion as of 2021.

The Skank Flank

The former Disney sweetheart gone bad girl Miley Cyrus is adorned with a plethora of tattoos, one of which being the so-called skank flank in the shape of a large dream catcher (Kim). Deemed to be the new tramp stamp, the skank flank as a term carries some more demeaning connotations than its predecessor. The word skank denotes sexual promiscuity just like it is the case with the word tramp from the previous paragraph. However, the word flank is problematic in a different way, as it is more commonly used for a cut of meat from a cow than it is used to describe a piece of human anatomy. As such, women are discursively demeaned to be comparable to a piece

of meat, which is not treated with any significant amount of respect in the West either, and combined, the name of this type of tattoo equates women with a promiscuous piece of meat. This comparison, or metaphor if you will, not only emphasises but actively reproduces the systemic objectification of women as something to be devoured most likely by men. What made Miley Cyrus an obvious candidate to represent this type of tattoo is her infamous *Wrecking Ball* phase during which Cyrus truly put her best efforts into distancing herself from the cutesy part of Hannah Montana from the children's' television of the same name that she had become synonymous with. As Cyrus metaphorically put Hannah Montana to rest, she did utilise her sexualised body in an unforgettable performance during the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards where Cyrus twerked against Robin Thicke wearing a nude set of latex lingerie and a large foam finger. Cyrus herself claims this performance not only helped her shed the family friendly character, but that it helped her grow up (Runtagh). It is interesting that Miley Cyrus resorted to essentially exploiting her body and sexuality in order to grow up. Furthermore, the VMAs and following *Wrecking Ball* music video in which Cyrus is performing naked on a wrecking ball may have compromised Miley's integrity both as a performer as well as a woman. While Cyrus did act the part of "woman", she did it in a grotesque and sexually exaggerated way, which could be perceived as promiscuous despite the fact that it was indeed a performance that was meant to provoke and likely cause some form of public outrage. It is worth considering whether this type of public act actually reinforces the stereotypes regarding tattooed women as deviants, unintelligent or promiscuous.

The skank flank, which will be called the rib cage tattoo from here on out, itself is rather hidden away in everyday life just like the tramp stamp, which again begs the question as to why women who have a rib cage tattoo are considered to be loose. While the tattoo, placed along the ribs, is in close proximity to the breast, it does not aggressively call attention to the breasts. If anything, the tattoo would draw attention to a potential case of side boob, which is a slang term that refers to "a sizable portion of a woman's breast is exposed from the side" ("Side boob"). Referring back to Margot Mifflin's accounts of the origins of women's tattoos in the Western societies, the fact that women's tattoos are historically more scandalous does come into play with the rib cage tattoo as well. Unlike the lower back tattoo, which was on display on the red carpet for the majority of the early 2000's, the rib cage is not as easily accessible so to speak. A woman has to wear less clothes for the ribs to be exposed than the lower back, which might be an explanation as to why the tattoo has a poor reputation. The fact that a larger portion of the body must be undressed for the tattoo to be visible goes against the traditional, somewhat archaic, expectations of modesty for

women. With Butler's approach to gender performances in mind, the state of undress needed to show the rib cage tattoo may cause some degree of mental turmoil; in general, the bare female body is a site of fascination, temptation and excitement to the majority of men, however traditionally the undressed female body is not permitted in the public eye, but rather hidden away in private. In this view, the women who do appear undressed in public are deemed to be women with a questionable moral, often condemned as either sex workers or exotic dancers. As such, it appears that the rib cage tattoo is a symptom of how overly sexualised the female body is and as a result must be hidden away in order to preserve the illusion of the body belonging to a respectable woman. Thus, the rib cage tattoo underscores the severe societal issues that are ruling in the patriarchy, which seem to have taken women and their bodies hostage in a battle that cannot be won. As Butler discussed, the juridical system produces its own subjects, and in this case, women are produced to be submissive and to reproduce this political persuasion. As a deduction from this, tattoos like the rib cage tattoo help reproduce the notion that women are inferior to men because they are shrouded in such persistent stereotyping.

The Underboob

The Barbadian superstar Rihanna and her sternum tattoo (Snead) will be the final example of how tattoos on women are stigmatised solely based on gender. Unlike the previous two tattoos with some unfortunate names, the tattoo Rihanna wears across her rib cage is not named in a manner that is as explicitly sexist. In layman's terms this type of tattoo is called the underboob, which does rather precisely indicate the location of the tattoo, but also draws unnecessary attention to the breasts, which bears witness to the superfluous sexualisation constantly applied to the female body in Western culture. Rihanna's sternum tattoo depicts the Egyptian goddess Isis, one of the most important deities of Egypt. Isis carries multiple meanings: "As mourner, she was a principal deity in rites connected with the dead; as magical healer, she cured the sick and brought the deceased to life; and as mother, she was a role model for all women" (Tyldesley). Rihanna's tattoo is a tribute to her late grandmother (Snead) and as such, the motive of Isis with all its religious significance seems suitable. On the other hand, it is worth discussing if the tattoo is actually cultural appropriation seeing as Rihanna does not have Egyptian roots. Nonetheless, the singer seems to be particularly fond of Egyptian imagery, as she has multiple Egyptian symbols tattooed on her body. Furthermore, Rihanna faced backlash in 2017 after starring on the cover of Vogue Arabia in an Egyptian headdress and channelling Queen Nefertiti (Pham). The fact that Rihanna, who is not Arabian descent, portrayed an Egyptian queen reaped criticism and accusations of cultural

appropriation. If a headdress elicits such strong emotions, the same should be the case for tattoos and not just Rihanna's. This is an example of how tattoos as a cultural form of expression might become problematic if they are not well thought through. While Rihanna's Iris sternum tattoo is a personal tribute to a late family member and by virtue of this a personal identity marker, it does make use of a religion and an ancient culture, which Rihanna is not a member of. As such, there seems to be a disconnect in what the signified is based on who experiences the tattoo. Like Patterson and Schroeder discussed, tattoos might be read wrong, and the wearer's intentions will be read back onto them as poor taste and bad culture. Rihanna's tattoo has the potential to perfectly encapsulate the essence of cultural tattoos being a problem in the same manner cultural clothing if used wrong or without respect and consideration.

When it comes to sexualisation of the tattoo, the placement is likely a key element. Unlike the rib cage tattoo, the sternum tattoo is placed directly under the breasts, in some cases inching up between the breasts along the sternum, and in most cases follows the natural contours of the body. In other words, the sternum tattoo emphasises the chest and can create an illusion of a larger bosom. Furthermore, the rib cage tattoo can be visible even when wearing a loose shirt with a so-called drop armhole. This is not the case with the sternum tattoo and as such it accentuates the sexual stereotypes from the previous paragraphs even more. Now, seeing as the sternum tattoo flows with the contours of the female body, accentuating the bosom and drawing attention, it can be argued that the sternum tattoo is the most exclusive to women, as men seem more likely to either get chest pieces located higher or smaller motives placed in their solar plexus and do not accentuate the contour of the breasts. Tattoos in general demand the external gaze, and the fact that the sternum tattoo quite literally underlines the breasts can make the tattoo a stamp of promiscuity. This tattoo does largely follow the same general societal rules as the rib cage tattoo due to the fact that the placements are so similar. Naturally, the tattoos themselves are not the problem, but rather they act as symptoms of a deeper seeded societal issue. To include Barthes' accounts, any tattoo is a signifier, but the signified varies based on motive, style and placement of the tattoo as well as the sex of the person wearing the tattoo. In the case of the past three types of tattoos on women, they signify sexual promiscuity, but this does not necessarily make them signs of sluttiness, stupidity or even deviancy; rather is makes these tattoos signs of something that is inherently wrong in society when a woman's morals and character are questioned based on what she chooses to decorate her body with. It bears witness to a patriarchal society trying its best to control women through social sanction reliant on outdated notions of bodily autonomy and sexuality.

The Spectacle of the Tattooed Woman

American tattoo artist and television personality, Kat Von D initially rose to fame from the television show *L.A. Ink* that documented day-to-day business of Kat Von D's Los Angeles tattoo salon. As is the case for most tattoo artists, Kat Von D is heavily tattooed herself including her face, neck, hands, and fingers (Gray), which is not common among working class women, as they need to be able to get a job. Even as the older, more conservative generation retire and the younger take their seats in professional life, tattoos still seem to be outlawed in many workplaces. This professional aversion to tattooed employees is more than likely based on the stereotype of tattooed people being deviant, as it applies to both men and women. However, as women are the focal point of this study, this paragraph will focus on the spectacle that is the tattooed woman and which obstacles she is likely to face in real life due to her tattoos and the stereotypes surrounding them. The stereotype of deviancy and tattooing, which Patterson and Schroeder account for, is most likely due to unsanitary scratchers, which are uneducated tattooists often causing more harm than good, tainting the trade. Mifflin accounts for a late 1940's scratcher named Edna Sanchez, who tried to remove a tattoo with acid and in doing so also rid her client of half an inch of flesh on his chest (38). Tattooing was outlawed in some states during the 1950's and 1960's in the wake of hepatitis outbreaks linked to dirty tattoo needles. As has been the case with other things, criminals such as gangs, male bikers and prisoners took to tattooing after it was outlawed and turned tattoos into emblems of deviancy. After this, tattoos were so stigmatised, especially when found on women, that a Boston rapist was allegedly acquitted after a small butterfly tattoo was found on the leg of his victim (39). This problematic history likely fuelled the stigma that tattooed women feel to this day. As a heavily tattooed woman, Kat Von D is subject to multiple issues. First, the plethora of tattoos on her body objectifies her sexually, as the sight of tattoos lead to interpretations of the tattooed woman as a sexual object, which has already been established. Furthermore, Kat Von D is pushing the set boundaries of masculine and feminine by engaging in these body projects, which are traditionally not considered feminine. However, the tattoos are a way for Kat Von D to differentiate herself from the masses according to Goulding and Follet. The way in which Kat Von D actually differs a bit from other tattooed women is through the notion of skin being a visual form curriculum vitae. Usually, tattoos will tell a story of deviancy for others to see and give way for strangers to sort tattooed women into negative social categories. However, because Kat Von D is a tattoo artist, her visual curriculum vitae reflects positively within her social arena. Tattoo artists are somewhat

expected to have a lot of tattoos themselves to entice the trust of their customers. As such, Kat Von D's job title gives her a legitimate excuse for her appearance and the stigma that shrouds tattoos.

Gender Bending and Tattoos

The famous Australian actress Ruby Rose will serve as the final example of how tattoos transform the female body into something grotesque. However, Ruby Rose has been chosen for this study not only for her plentiful tattoos (Rose), but more so due to the fact that she challenges the set cultural notions of gender. With her androgenous looks, Ruby Rose has not only been confused with male pop superstar Justin Bieber (Jarvis), but also compared to an androgenous version of Angelina Jolie due to her interesting combination of harsh and soft features (Teitel). Rose identifies as gender fluid with feminine pronouns, but has a history of gender confusion behind her, which may account for the aforementioned androgyny. In her interview with The Guardian, Rose accounts how even as a small child, she was convinced that she was a boy and as a six-year-old used to bind her chest in spite of not having breasts to bind (Jarvis). As a teen, Rose was pushed into a more feminine style, but eventually pushed back and reverted into the masculine style she was comfortable with. Rose accounts for the professional troubles she has had during adulthood, as it was not possible to get a job looking too masculine. Rose recalls how she landed an acting role in a big American franchise movie and then lost the job, as the director allegedly said "Nah, she can't play the sexy girl. She looks like Justin Bieber" (Jarvis), accounting for the sexist nature of showbiz. This is congruent with Butler's notion of performance and her account of the transgender person. If Rose was to play an androgenous or even masculine role, she likely would have had no issue, but her appearance is so incongruent with the idealistic "sexy girl" that the premise of the role would be distorted; Rose does not act the part of "woman" in a satisfying manner and thus her career as an actress has suffered for it. As mentioned, when it comes to gender, Rose is quoted to have said that she is "very gender fluid and feel more like I wake up every day sort of gender neutral" (Molloy), but would choose to be a man if given the choice. Rose is at ease with her anatomy, but says, "I feel like it's just all in how I dress and how I talk and how I look and feel, and that makes me happy" (Jarvis).

Thus, Ruby Rose is aware of how the combination of her appearance and gender identity pushes her towards the edge of what society has found to be traditionally acceptable, but her rather dark tattoo sleeves might make this stigmatisation worse. Returning to Butler's idea of the transgender person, Ruby Rose acts her gender poorly seen from a strictly traditional perspective; she does not wear her hair and nails long, does not wear pretty dresses nor does she act both sexy

and dainty. Quite the contrary, Rose wears her hair short, her clothes are traditionally quite masculine, and her arms are covered in rather dark tattoos, which reach down over the back of one of her hands. In combination with the style of clothes and hair as well as Rose's general charisma, which does give off a more masculine energy than what is known from most famous actresses, the tattoos add to the androgyny and help push Rose into a gender limbo, which might create some degree of cognitive dissonance in others when they are confronted with Ruby Rose. Thus, Rose perfectly exemplifies how tattoos can also be dependent on other factors such as clothing, hair style and charisma. Furthermore, Rose's heavy tattoos are also congruent with Goulding and Follett's claim that heavily tattooed women challenge gender stereotypes by engaging in identity projects that are considered to be both masculine and deviant. The notion of deviancy also applies to Ruby Rose, as her tattoos extend down her hand. In modern Western society, it is rare to see upstanding members of society with highly visible tattoos on the face, neck, hands, and fingers, which is most likely a testimony to how ingrained the association between tattoos and deviance truly is to this day. This also testifies to the way in which tattoos and the stereotypes surrounding them are stuck in a self-perpetuating pattern; tattoos are considered to be a sign of deviancy and thus high standing members of society refrain from getting tattoos on the most visible body parts. However, the stereotype of deviancy does not scare the actual deviants such as criminals and gang members, who then reinforce the stereotype by tattooing their hands, necks and even faces. As it has been the case with the tramp stamp, skank flank and underboob tattoo, these ingrown ideas of tattooed women being deviants is a symptom of how the patriarchy seeks to control women through social punishment, which Ruby Rose endured in her struggles to get jobs in showbiz because she acted the gender expected from her wrong. Rose's tattoos contribute to this wrongdoing of "woman", a category Rose does not identify with in the first place. The fact that the gender discussions have become more facetted in later years, but Western stereotyping regarding tattoo culture has not changed poses a rallying cry for revolutionising the way in which we assume gender identities based on quick judgements formed from our external gaze.

Tattoos as a Cultural Problem in the West

Before delving into the subject as to why and how tattoos as a whole are a problem for women, it is extremely important to note that all five of the women used as examples in the previous paragraphs are, by virtue of their fame, respected members of society and are less likely to suffer any considerable consequences due to their tattoos alone. Some of Rihanna's tattoos bear the potential to land her in hot water, but it seems this has yet to happen and Kat Von D is known for

her tattoos at this point. So far, some reasons why tattoos on women are problematic have been uncovered, yet the answers are not satisfying here in 2021. After four waves of feminism, it should seem obvious that tattoos are not a legitimate basis of any kind of judgement, but women still face social punishment for their tattoos every day. Is it because of the way women act in music videos, movies and photos? Miley Cyrus' rather scandalous *Wrecking Ball* phase has been discussed, but her tattoo is older than the music video in which she swings around on a wrecking ball naked. Rihanna has created multiple music videos in various revealing costumes and there was that one song about her cheating on her partner. However, that is hardly an explanation to anything other than her long career. This possibility is further dismissed by the fact that tattoo free artists dance in costumes just as revealing without necessarily being branded as sluts. Kat Von D landed herself in a bit of hot water after proclaiming that her son would not be vaccinated 2018 (Cooper), a statement she later withdrew and apologised for, as it was completely uninformed (Giliver), thus admitting to some ignorance, which tattooed women are supposed to be infamous for.

Then what is the problem if not the way women act? Most likely, the problem is the way in which the patriarchy works. Women are reproduced in the image of the patriarchy in order to maintain the power structures herein. As women are made out to be the weaker sex by society, we act the role as we are told and hereby reinforcing the stereotype. When it comes to women's bodies, the cultural meanings imprinted onto them stem from the patriarchy and as a part of the repeated stylised acts, women, again, reinforce these acts to be those of the female body. Gender is largely performed like it has been scripted for centuries, although the gender spectrum is starting to expand, as non-binary people are accepted more widely. This acceptance does bring hope that women's tattoos will be accepted as well and the negative stereotypes will vanish in time, but seeing as the tattoos reproduce the stereotypes themselves, it does not seem likely. Tattoos in and of themselves are not the problem; the problem is how the patriarchy insists on policing the female body and sexualising the little things women do with their bodies.

Discussion

It has become evident that certain tattoos and having a large number of tattoos can cause problems for women in the Western world. Criticism concealed as questions like "How do you plan on getting a job?" or "What do you think that will look like in fifty years?" are far from uncommon after the tattoo has been done, but do people actually stop and think before going under the needle? As Chiara Gabriel mentioned in her essay, at the time of getting tattooed, she was not aware that one day her lower back tattoo would brand her a slut in popular culture. The fact that culture is fluid

and fashion changes every season causes tattooing to be an extremely risky practice to engage in; think of the unspeakable numbers of semicolons, infinity signs and dandelions exploding into a flock of swallows tattooed onto people worldwide because they were the new tattoo fad of the year. Naturally, the individual ascribes their tattoo some kind of personal meaning in most cases, but the tattoo, stripped of originality, does become a sign of communal identity across individuals who cannot possibly all know one another. The way that tattoos are carbon copied and printed onto the next millennial girl does show how tattooing is a commodity in our society. Nowadays, tattoos are created by artists meaning that they will draw up the customer's ideas for the individual customer, creating a one-of-a-kind personalised tattoo for every single client they have. However, the "Pinterest tattoos" of the swallows and the infinity signs take away the artistry of the trade, essentially turning the artist into a "tattooer" who only applies so-called flash tattoos, which are picked from a sheet of ready-made designs. This goes directly against the idea that tattoos are identity projects and a way for the individual to show their personal history and maybe even process trauma. But do all tattoos need to be personalised and strategically placed where they can be hidden away easily? The "fast fashion" tattoos might bring a new problem to the table in the shape of women with these tattoos being branded as "airhead millennials" in a few years.

This very branding based on tattoos is the problem. Whether women are branded as promiscuous, unintelligent, too masculine, etc. based on a tattoo, the brand itself is a symptom of a deeply flawed culture in which women's bodies do not belong to the woman exclusively; everyone has something to say about it. So the notion of women taking back the ownership of their bodies through engaging in body projects like tattooing seems to be a natural reaction to a hostile environment. However, the act of taking back control actually also strengthens the grip that society has on the body, as the tattoos push the body into the position of being an object for the external gaze and other people's opinions. The body will always be subject to the opinions of others whether it is due to the body being tattooed, too skinny, too fat, too muscular, too tall or whatever physical trait others might find negative or even offensive. Tattooing does provide a means of taking back control, but it seems to be a lost cause due to the paradox of bodily autonomy versus powerlessness; women will always be subject to judgements as long as the patriarchy is working as it does today. It does seem like the use of derogatory names for tattoos is merely another way to sexualise the female body and discredit the measures taken to regain some sense of control as well as individuality for the woman. Now this is not the only paradoxical aspect at play within tattooing; the empowerment/self-mutilation dualism is also relevant. The act of tattooing can be perceived as a

form of glorified, permanent self-mutilation, as the natural body is altered causing some degree of moral panic. The practice of tattooing is loaded with possible health risks as the skin is open and susceptible to disease, but even after the skin has healed over, the danger is still present in the shape of sudden onset allergies to the ink. Traditionally, women are not expected to take risks in the same way men are, and this could be another answer to the question why women's tattoos reproduce the problematic stereotypes and are seen as a rebellion against the patriarchy and its expectations aimed at women in particular. This idea is congruent with the notions Mifflin posed of tattooed women being more scandalous than non-tattooed women or even tattooed men in the late 1800's and early to mid 1900's.

This leads on to the next point, which is the difference in how the tattooed body is perceived based on gender. As it has been made clear by this point, women with tattoos are perceived to be either stupid, slutty, masculine or all three and possibly more. The history of male bikers, gang members and prisoners adopting tattooing in the 1950's and 60's as emblems of their outlaw status largely reflect the stereotypes surrounding tattooed men today. The same notions are in evidence in today's society, but it seems to be so in the older, more conservative generations, as a tattoo sleeve on a man is no longer a guarantee of a criminal record in the younger generations that grew up after tattoos became a part of mainstream culture. Although men's tattoos are also stigmatised, they are not subject to the same derogatory name calling as women's tattoos. When a man has a lower back tattoo it is still referred to as a tramp stamp, but men are not judged based on their sexuality in the same way women are; women are shamed if they have a high number of sexual partners, as this makes them slutty, but women are also shamed if they have a low number of sexual partners, as this makes them prude. On the other hand, men are generally applauded for having a high number of sexual partners but having a lower number does come with some degree of shaming for men in some social circles. This illuminates the issue of women's tattoos being referred to in derogatory terms due to the systemic sexism. In an article for Psychology Today by Vinita Mehta, the sexualisation of tattooed women is investigated. In general, men are more sensitive to visual beauty than women are and even wearing the colour red is interpreted as some sexual intent. In other words, "Men tend to *overestimate* women's sexual intentions" according to psychologist Nichola Guéguen with the Université de Bretagne-Sud (Mehta). Studies have been conducted on how men perceive tattooed women and in one of these studies, a group of men were shown one of two versions of an image of a 24-year-old woman; in one of the images, a dragon tattoo had been added to her arm and in the other image she had no tattoos. When the men were faced with the tattoo, they

judged her as "less athletic, less motivated, less honest, less generous, less religious, less intelligent, and less artistic" than without the tattoo (Mehta). Thus, tattoos do bring down the attractiveness of a woman in the eye of a man, but at the same time, tattoos heighten the level of perceived promiscuity according to Guéguen, who could not determine this to be true scientifically. In other words, men think that tattooed women are more likely to sleep with them than non-tattooed women are and will actually pay more sexual attention to tattooed women, as was proven in a field study among beach goers in Brittany. The results showed that men would approach tattooed women faster and more often than non-tattooed women and that they estimated their chances for a date or sex were higher with tattooed women. Guéguen explains these results from an evolutionary perspective, as some women might use tattoos to elicit the attention of men in order to find a mate. Men will interpret the tattoos as a form of advertisement and are more likely to pursue the women who are "advertising" their sexuality in order to spread their genes. However, Guéguen acknowledges the limitations of this study and recommends future studies in the correlation between tattoos and promiscuity to be based on men's stereotypes and lived experiences with tattooed women.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer how the tattooed female body reproduces problematic social positions in the white patriarchy of modern Western culture using body and gender theories by Judith Butler, consumer culture theory by Patterson and Schroeder as well as Roland Barthes' notions of myth and signs. The study found no correlation between tattoos and actual promiscuity, lowered intelligence or deviancy; on the contrary, tattoos were found to reproduce existing societal issues within the white patriarchy of the Western world, which are largely expressed through stereotyping women with certain kinds of tattoos or a large number of tattoos congruent with the notions presented by Les Back as well as Patterson and Schroeder. The historical context of women's tattoos provided by Margot Mifflin further backs up the fact that tattoos are not the problem, but rather they work as emblems of shame based on archaic notions of and expectations to the female body, modesty and gender roles. Moreover, the tattooed Egyptian mummies and the Malakan tribal women's stories account for cultures with vastly different views on tattooed women; in these societies, the tattoos were used as a means of protection during pregnancy and childbirth or as emblems of matrimony, which were respected. The use of these two examples has proven how culture is a fluid notion and can easily become muddied if it is read onto others out of context as it happened with the Egyptian mummies.

The field studies by Nichola Guéguen, which were included in the discussion, truly underscored the findings that the tattoos themselves are not a reliable means of gauging sexual frivolousness, but are still perceived to be advertisements in place to attract male attention, which is exactly what the tattoos do. The article also suggested that there is some evolutionary reasoning behind this, as men are biologically inclined to spread their genes as much as possible. Thus, the stereotypes regarding tattooed women in conjunction with basic human biology creates the foundation on which tattooed women are sexually objectified. Finally, the study found no evidence that men are purposefully hostile or degrading towards tattooed women, but that archaic stereotypes, which likely stem from a more religious society of times gone by, has been ingrained into the social consciousness creating a negative spiral of stigmatisation.

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Abstract

Tattoos are becoming increasingly popular as a means of portraying both personal and cultural identity, personal and familial history, belonging whether in a familial, cultural, religious or political sense, and much more. However, every day Western women with tattoos are still facing negative social consequences such as stigmatisation and sexual stereotypes based on their tattoos. This study set out to investigate how the tattooed female body reproduces problematic social positions in the white patriarchy of modern Western culture using body and gender theories by Judith Butler to create an understanding of gender and sex as separate and how these two notions work in society. Consumer Culture Theory by Patterson and Schroeder is utilised to gain insight into the world of tattooing as a commodity that has consequences for women every day. Furthermore, Les Back provides deeper insight into the world of tattoos. Saussure's notions of semiotics are applied to the study, as it depends on the reading of signs and decoding of visual representations. Several examples of famous women with tattoos were utilised and the analysis consists of tribal tattoos that saved lives, the tramp stamp, the skank flank and the underboob tattoo as well as two examples of heavily tattooed women who walk on the limits of traditional gender stereotypes due to their tattoos. Through the analysis, possible explanations to the poor reputation of the tattoos are given in order to contextualise the embodied societal issues that tattoos represent. Analysis proved that while certain tattoos on female bodies are undeniably shrouded in stereotypes that stigmatise the woman, the tattoos themselves cannot be deemed to be the sole cause of this stigmatisation. The study found that tattoos merely mirror the society in which they appear and any issues regarding women's tattoos are a reflection of the issues in society itself. Thus, tattoos that are deemed to be slutty are only subject to this negative and derogatory stereotype due to the fact that the patriarchy generally holds women in low esteem. The sexualisation of tattoos was found to be a tactic of controlling the female body although it must be noted that it does have some evolutionary purpose, as the decorated woman attracts more male attention. Regardless of evolution, the stigmatisation and sexualisation that tattooed women experience every day serves no apparent purpose and is rooted in outdated gender stereotypes unfit for the 21st century, a time of rapid development in women's rights.