

BENEATH THE SURFACE:  
HOW INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AFFECT TATTOOS-  
EXPLORING THE FLESH CANVAS

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Exploring the Flesh Canvas**

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This research explains how having tattoos relates to every part of intersecting identities- from gender to age to religion. By seeing how ten interviewed participants' personal identities influenced their tattoo decisions, this thesis shows how meaning is made from and for ink.

A section on how Jewish people can reclaim the meaning of a tattoo after battling the generational trauma of their ancestors being branded by ink in The Holocaust is an important part of this research. Many Jewish people are reclaiming and empowering the meaning of their body art to counter this trauma and other aspects of religious rules, while battling their family's frightful past.

Through my research, I explored how intersectionality plays a role in a person's tattoo choices. The main categories on which I focused for the interviews were gender, class, race, and religion- especially Judaism. Findings suggest that a person's identity greatly impacts their tattoo selection, placement, and style. The meaning people make from ink or the design they curate due to their identity is strongly correlated. The interviews also make clear that tattoos help people heal from trauma and take ownership over their body.

For individuals who struggled finding themselves or feeling connected to their physical body due to how they look, the body parts they were born with, or the color of their skin, tattoos are a method to connect the internal with the external and express their true identity.

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## **Dedication**

I want to dedicate my thesis to those who find meaning in permanent artwork. Whether you are fighting invisible battles and use tattoos to represent your struggles or feel a connection to a design you want forever on your body, I hope this thesis sheds light on the journey you are pursuing. People see you and your beautiful skin. For anyone who is fighting a visible or invisible struggle and uses ink to cover up their scars, this is for you. For anyone who has suffered great loss, change, or trauma, and uses tattoos as a memorial or healing mechanism, keep proudly displaying who you are and where you come from. And to those who suffered or have had family members / loved ones suffer through the traumas of The Holocaust, my thesis is for you. I hope this brings understanding about both the history of Holocaust tattoos and the present and future ways of reclaiming the meaning of body art for Jewish individuals.

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## **Introduction / Thesis Description and History**

Since 5000 BCE, tattooing has been an important part of societies (Putzi 2006). Tattoos began by being associated with very cultural meanings- some of which we can still see today. With racialized implications of what not having “pure” skin means, tattooing was very controversial for many years in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Putzi 2006). Over time, in more recent centuries, tattoos began to take on a different meaning: one associated with violence and rebellion (Putzi 2006). Oftentimes, members of gangs shared the same tattoos and people would both give and receive tattoos in the prison system. This was a very unsanitary way to prove loyalty to a certain group, gang, or person. Tattoos were linked with not being able to get a job and being the disappointment of some families. Depending on the place and people, aspects of this still hold true today. Yet, as time passes and more styles of tattoos emerge, tattooing has transformed into a more recognized form of art and self-expression, not to mention a symbol of ethnic significance (Putzi 2006).

This thesis explores the relationship between tattoos and the persons receiving them in correlation to their intersecting identities. I describe different aspects to explore people’s social identities, such as gender and sexuality, class, and most importantly to my topic- religion. I am bringing in a Jewish perspective on tattoos. I am Jewish and have always been curious about the implications surrounding tattooed individuals who share my religion.

The Torah claims that the flesh should not be modified with body markings or piercings, so ultra-Orthodox people will rarely have tattoos (Lucas 2018). Due to this law in Judaism, Nazis took it upon themselves to disturb the order of the religion and many Jewish people were forced to get tattoos against their will during the Holocaust. “Traditional Jewish law bans tattoos, based on Leviticus 19:28: ‘Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any

marks upon you: I am the LORD.’ When they mention the law, many rabbis add the term ‘voluntary’ or ‘discretionary’ to such tattoos in deference to the numbers that were tattooed on Jews in Nazi concentration camps, an association that further darkens the image of the tattoo among older Jews” (Strickler 2008). Yet through this trauma, there is light in the dark because people are beginning to use their generational trauma as fuel to bring peace and new traditions to the culture. Additionally, although proven to be a myth, many Jewish individuals think they are not allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, which might deter them from getting body art or make them question already made tattoo choices. Yet, many Jewish people are reclaiming and empowering the meaning of their body art to counter this and other aspects of the religious rules, while battling their traumatic past and adhering to other parts of Jewish law. Since being considered a “good Jew” has a different meaning for every person, there is not one correct way someone can experience Judaism, and therefore, people can make their own choices about whether or not to express themselves through the art of tattooing (although an Orthodox Rabbi might disagree).

Alongside the Jewish component to my research, the goal through this project is to relate the act of getting a tattoo, having one, and the artistic creation to many parts of one’s intersecting identities, especially as religion and gender. By reading scholarly texts of the past and present, I analyzed how tattoos have changed over time into more established body art that promotes healing. After conducting ten interviews with participants possessing one or more tattoo(s), I was able to better understand the reasons why people get the specific tattoos they do and how they correlate to their inner self. Thus, my research question is: How does identity play into the significance of tattoos, and in particular, how are Jewish people reclaiming the meaning of a tattoo after their ancestors were branded with them during The Holocaust?



## Literature Review

### Introduction

Having a tattoo in recent years is generally a socially acceptable choice. But body art has not always been as popular or respected as it is in the twenty-first century. By researching and studying the long history of tattooing, from Jewish people being branded by them in The Holocaust to symbolism they carry in certain demographics, we can better understand how tattoos came to be widely popularized. While the history of religion and tattoos has been briefly researched in the past, the connection between The Holocaust and Jewish people's feelings about tattoos now needs to be explored in much more detail. I found one article that almost hits the nail on the head with this topic, but it is only two pages long with not enough to say. It appears that research on the correlation between Judaism, The Holocaust, and tattoos has not been thoroughly studied. This relationship between identity, social acceptance and tattoos is important for the formation of self-expression and the healing from past trauma for generations currently and those to come.

### Finding Meaning in Ink

Modern tattoos can be characterized as “sacralization practices... [or] processes whereby the subjects distinguish some reality they deem special from the rest” (Morello SJ 2021). When this reality is translated into a picture or text, the meaning for the person getting that particular image or script permanently tattooed on their body becomes extremely important. A lyric, phrase, image, or design can hold meaning to someone, but by getting it tattooed on your body, the person is usually certain this meaning will last a lifetime, as the ink will (unless forcefully

removed). By researching a sample of Latin American people from differing backgrounds and identities, Morello SJ came to the conclusion that tattoos are a solid way to pull meaning from one's "inner realm" (Morello SJ 2021). Tattoos give situations and life experiences a sense of permanence, which is significant and provides a strong indicator of identity, both on a surface level with others viewing the visible tattoos and on a personal level with oneself connecting to their own tattoos and being able to outwardly express themselves.

Although my thesis is focusing on real-life human beings and not cartoon characters, through my research process I discovered an eye-opening article about the portrayals and representations of fictional characters in film. Fans know The Joker as a madman, spreading evil around by doing crime. The Joker was mentally ill and covered in tattoos (in "Suicide Squad" specifically). "In most of these tattoos, there is a clear message of the Joker's proximity to violence—he is a jester of death intent on killing his nemesis" (Preston 2023). A tattoo can tell a lot about a person, and this article is a great representation of how exterior expression of self can lead others to have a false perception of you, even if you do not internally match what you portray through your ink. This is why tattoos are powerful social indicators, and the more meaning a piece of body art has, the more others who view you only from the outside can try to better understand who you are on the inside.

### **Trusting The Process (And Person)**

Every feeling an individual holds about another person is situational and personal, differing by location, emotional state at the time of interaction, and upbringing, among others. There are mixed signals given to people by individuals who have tattoos. The feelings associated with someone who has tattoos impact how comfortable the tattooed individual is with outwardly

expressing themselves. The social acceptability of tattoos may not fully line up with one's personal culture or values, shifting their opinion on the body art or on whom the body art lies.

To some, there is a sense (or lack) of trust associated with having tattoos. "The presence of a visible tattoo lowers trust judgements across the board," the board being socioeconomic class ranks (Timming et al. 2016). Timming notes that trust is based primarily on perceived cues. Why does permanent ink on the body equate to little or no trust? Is it representative of poor life choices? If so, why and how can this perception be shifted positively? These are all questions that will be answered in this thesis since internal identity is connected to perception.

The lack of trust is connected to values, as people are more likely to find connection with someone who shares a belief or moral and therefore, if one person does not have tattoos and the other one does, they might think the other will disagree on moral beliefs and values as well (Timming et al. 2016). This is not to say that all people with tattoos and all without have nothing in common and cannot share certain belief systems the same. Yet, if both individuals have tattoos, they can share a common interest, forming an instant connection, bond and sense of baseline trust, as they will be perceived alike by each other. One recent example of this type of tattoo bias is when the Supreme Court denied a man from Los Angeles his visa because of his appearance (Castillo 2024). The man has multiple tattoos across his body, and the Court deemed him unfit to obtaining the visa, without a proper explanation to his family. Following an in-depth analysis of his tattoos, the federal government determined he was a part of a violent gang that began in Los Angeles in the 1980s. This is why tattoos can shape someone's perception of who you are as a person. Just because someone has a gang tattoo, for example, does not necessarily mean they are a violent person. And tattoos should not be the reason for which someone is denied their visa to live in the United States. Thus, tattoos hold significant meaning not just to

the individual on whom the ink is tattooed, but to individuals around them who use tattoos as social indicators of one's character. For these reasons, choosing a tattoo wisely is extremely important.

### **Historic Practices, Racial Implications, and Gendered Bodies**

Jennifer Putzi takes readers back to the history of tattooing to explain what permanent ink on the body meant to people in the nineteenth century in the United States (Putzi 2006). Putzi starts by analyzing historic figure Hester and her small body art, which was seen as a threat to others. She details how a certain identity trait can be captured by the ink and placed onto the body to whom that identity is important. By detailing aspects of intersectionality that are vital to human existence, such as gender and race, Putzi places emphasis on the evolution from slavery and slave tattoos to establishing interpersonal meaning for ink. She dives into a rough evolutionary timeline of how tattoos become popularized and relates the rise in popularity to comfort in one's personal identity. Putzi touches on the fact that a lot of men were very against getting a tattoo due to fear that the pain caused by the needle would lead to humiliation if shown. They wanted to avoid embarrassment to ensure they were not stripped of their emotionless masculinity. Vulnerability would make them appear as more of a "feminine object to be observed and thereby dominated" (Putzi 2006). This gender dynamic in relation to pain and fear demonstrates the roles of masculinity and femininity, even as we know it today. Many men are still afraid to show distressed or sad emotions publicly and think they are acting too feminine if they need to cry. Toxic masculinity reinforces the idea that women are weak and fragile, and tattoos are a way for women to prove their strength and resilience against these gendered social norms.

## Intergenerational Trauma

Holocaust survivors' family members are often greatly impacted by their ancestors' traumatic pasts. There is a lot we know about the horrors of The Holocaust from storytelling- The brutal torture Jewish individuals endured, the branding by number tattooed on their forearm. East Bay News Group studied how recently, “the number that was tattooed on the bodies of inmates in the Auschwitz complex has been replicated on the bodies of some survivor descendants” (East Bay News Group 2016).



(Rudoren, New York Times)

The tattooed number turned from a branding symbol on Jewish individuals to a symbol of remembrance for many of their descendants, which is a lovely tribute. “Jews have a responsibility to remember the Holocaust. But on the other hand, there is an upside to the tattoos

in that these kids have a feeling of security in their identity..." (Strickler 2008). The paper also delves into "private and public memorialisation" and the ways in which a public display, like a tattoo in a visible place, is much more vulnerable and open to perception than a private display. The placement of a tattoo is not often thought about as an important part of having one, but it plays a huge role in external perception and one's identity can be misperceived depending on the design and body placement.

There are various traumas impacting a person's life that can be represented through tattoos. Some of the most prominent are the semicolon, Medusa, and butterfly. These three tattoos represent an overcoming of a particular stage in one's life that dictated their well-being.

The semicolon, in writing, creates a pause in a sentence. This separates two individual parts of a sentence where a comma or period cannot quite do the trick. Similarly, as a tattoo, the semicolon represents overcoming a moment of contemplating one's life and pausing to reconsider before moving forward with the next chapter. Often, these tattoos are used to supersede the act of committing suicide or performing self-harm (Forum 2016). This shows perseverance in life and hope for blooming again. The semicolon tattoo originated from Amy Bleuel, who took her own life in 2017 after battling years of mental health struggles (Forum 2016). Now, the tiny symbol has a huge significance.



(Forum 2016)

Medusa is a figure in Greek mythology who was seduced by Neptune, and then grew snakes for hair on her head and could turn men to stone (Bowers 1990). As a tattoo, Medusa is used to represent overcoming the trauma of sexual assault. The snakes as Medusa's hair symbolize survival, protecting and defending the individual from harm. Medusa has become a figure of strength and protection to people- especially women- who have undergone a sexual assault- especially perpetrated by men.



(Preston, PopSugar, 2023)

The butterfly is a beautiful insect that starts life as a caterpillar and undergoes metamorphosis, a process by which an immature being becomes an adult. Whether suffering from the consequences of self-harm, or growing out of a traumatic past (when still a caterpillar), the tattoo symbolizes a blossoming of oneself and developing into a more mature, beautiful version (as a butterfly) (Leokoy 2018).





(Tattoo by @nemo.tattoo, 2018)

The healing process by which ink therapy helps individuals can be accredited to the long history of tattoos and making meaning out of the artwork. These tattoos serve as the individual saying, “I went through this trauma, and this art is my reclamation to show that I am more powerful than what has happened to me.” The ink itself cannot speak but the meaning is very loud.

The outward portrayal of self-identity has correspondence to visible tattoos. Tattoos on the body can be described as a “border zone between the social and the self” (Hutter 2016). Describing ink in this way shows how perception becomes reality, and outside perception of someone might not reflect how they feel internally. Hutter conceptualizes gender roles and power relations by exploring the idea of “otherness,” or being distinguished as different from the norm. Once again, The Holocaust and Jewish identity affirmation through tattoos is brought up in this piece to better understand the role of self through ink.

## Methodology

My thesis question is about tattoos and tattooing, relating the act of getting or having a tattoo to parts of intersectionality- from gender to sexuality to religion to tradition. To reiterate, my research question reads, “How does identity play into the significance of tattoos, and in particular, how are Jewish people reclaiming the meaning of a tattoo after their ancestors were branded with them during The Holocaust?” Thus, the approach to gaining insight on these intersectional topics was interviews. Interviewing multiple people from all across parts of Eugene, Oregon and other West Coast cities of differing ages, sexualities, gender identities, religions, and classes adequately represented the people from whom I was trying to draw conclusions. These interviews took time to acquire, since I needed to physically go into Jewish spaces, queer spaces, and find other contacts through snowball sampling who fit the diverse bill to meet my project’s needs.

I conducted ten interviews with people who had one or more tattoos. Jewish people with tattoos made up seventy percent of my participant population, and non-Jewish people with tattoos made up thirty percent. This Jewish majority was unintentional, but allowed for a more well-rounded perspective on the religion questions, and in particular, the Holocaust section of the interview. Eight out of ten participants were White, with one being Asian and one being Black. Four of the ten identify under the umbrella term, queer, one being a non-binary lesbian, one being gay, one being bisexual, and the last not labeling more specific than queer. The ages of my participants range from 19 to 81 years old, with people in their twenties being the mean. I tried to have a diverse group of interview participants, which was difficult with no budget and being physically confined to Eugene. All my participants had different and unique stories about their tattoo journey and choices.

I promoted my interview study on social media, such as Instagram and Snapchat to reach an audience in my age range (See requirements in Appendix below). To recruit Jewish folks specifically, I went to Oregon Hillel and Chabad on campus to see if anyone was willing to participate and utilized snowball sampling through friends and family members, since I am Jewish and have many Jewish connections and acquaintances. These individuals were the easiest for me to acquire for my study.

Additionally, I interviewed people who have meaningful tattoos and people who were walk-ins and got one from a flash sheet. I talked with people who have full tattoo sleeves versus people who just have one tattoo. I conversed with family members of Holocaust survivors to see their experience and generational trauma, and how that impacts how they look at the meaning of tattoos. I wanted to talk to people of all different races, ethnicities, ages, genders, sexualities, customs, and living places. I wanted to interview older people with saggy skin and tattoos they got when they were younger and establish a comparison to someone with a new patchwork sleeve that looks more elegant but might lack meaning. Which is more meaningful? It depends fully on the person and what is important to them.

Another approach aside from the interview process is scholarly research from the library. Researching books, peer-reviewed articles, and journals helped me better understand the relationship between tattoos and people, and this was a helpful tactic of research. However, there is a vast difference between reading something from a book and interviewing someone with first hand experience. During interviews, I was able to understand the raw emotions of people's family trauma, as opposed to reading them through text, which does not allow for deep connections and emotional tone of voice. The personal stories are what I am most interested in, not the general statistics.

## Findings

My findings reveal that the identities of an individual, such as gender, class, and religion, impact their tattoo choices. These choices represent a reclamation of self and their past. The conclusions are influential to see the value in self expression through tattoos. Visible body art is used to show an aspect of one's identity as a way to cultivate new conversations around these identity factors and promote healing from trauma.

### **Gender, Placement and Style:**

Gender plays just as significant a role in tattoo placement on the body as what design someone gets. Placement in relation to how individuals view a person is a large factor when considering where on the body to put a tattoo. Alongside people wanting to be able to see their own tattoos, placing them in spots that are visually pleasing to others, or either very obvious or very hidden from the outside world, is important to almost every person I interviewed. One participant said "I am aware that certain tattoos and their placement can affect your career, so this [tattoo] is coverable very easily, and so will the ones I plan to get in the future... that was my dad's only caveat." (Alyssa, 19). Consciously thinking about careers and respect for parental figures is a wise consideration when getting a tattoo. While extremely unfortunate that tattoos can still hold one back from obtaining a certain job or being attractive to an individual, this is still the reality in 2024.

One of my interviewees stated, "For my body, I would prefer to cover them up if I want to. Most people don't know I have tattoos... One day I would consider getting something more visible. But I have a policy about my tattoos that if I have an idea of what I want, I have to sit on

it for at least a year, and if I still want it after a year, I'll get the tattoo" (Jake, 22). The self control and strong judgment this individual possesses for his tattoo protocol is admirable, as moving too swiftly with getting a new piece of ink can result in loss of meaning or dislike over time.

I have found through my interviews that gender is a determinant on where a person puts their tattoos. One person I interviewed stated, "The way my gender identity or presentation comes into that... for [tattoo] placement and sizing choices, I'm looking at it through that heterosexual male gaze of what is still attractive on a woman dating men. There's still those subtle standards" (Talia, 39). Recognizing what will look visually appealing or "attractive" to others tells me that people are greatly concerned with how others view them and how they present themselves in social and romantic settings. This conscious thought of placement with tattoos in effort to have other people perceive or not perceive them in a certain way tells me that they are cautious with their placement because they have a desire to present more feminine or masculine. Gender is a large part of what I am analyzing in my study, and this personal tattoo for Talia turned identity-oriented because of placement in relation to her being a woman. One of my interviewees told me about how their tattoos are meaningful because they are non-binary and they could not control what body parts they were born with but can control what they choose to put on their body. This is how bodily autonomy can be shaped by tattoo choices in meaningful manners. One participant, Anna, said, "Identifying as a woman impacts everything that I do. Not necessarily like, 'I got this because it helps me feel more in tune with my womanhood,' but I think all of my tattoos have been tattooed on me by women, and that's really important to me to feel comfortable" (Anna, 22). My other participants did not signify how their gender played a role in their tattoo choices.

My research suggests that women get more feminine-styled tattooed- such as dainty flowers or cursive fonts- whereas men get more masculine-styled tattooed- such as strong animal faces or roman numerals. There seem to be more pointed, sharp edges on men's tattoos and more curved, soft designs on women's. From a sociological standpoint, this may be the case because men have a desire to seem strong and tough, and any tattoo that could be perceived as feminine would be a sign of weakness to them.

### **Class and Location:**

Getting a tattoo is an economic privilege. Tattoos are very expensive, and not everyone can afford to put ink on their bodies. One of my interviewees stated, "I spent an ungodly amount of money on these tattoos, and that wouldn't come without the privilege of having parents that can help me with other expenses that allow me to afford that. My first tattoo cost about \$995 and I spent close to \$1400 on the second one..." (Josh, 21). Thus, economic status is important with tattoos. One of my participants said, "If you have tattoos, your socioeconomic status comes into play... they can be kind of spendy..." (Anna, 22). Three out of the first five people interviewed stated that they were middle class. One said she "was raised upper middle class," and that seems to be common among participants who identify as middle class now (Jamie, 81). I initially thought class would have a correlation to tattoos, as ink is not very affordable (if done professionally) and it takes a great privilege in class status to be able to afford this luxury. The research made clear that tattoos are all about accessibility- a place and time.

The location of the person's residence matters. A lot of my interviewees have said their class and geographic location played into their tattoo decisions greatly. This had a lot to do with what they were exposed to growing up and who they surround themselves with now. People who

grew up in more religious areas of the country seemed more hesitant to get tattoos because they were not exposed to people with them from a younger age. The people I interviewed who are from Oregon specifically or live in Oregon currently stated that their perception of people with tattoos has always had a positive association and they felt more comfortable to get their own tattoos. My participants are originally from various regions across the country, but all live on the West coast now, so I find it fascinating that they all noted location as being an important factor in their tattoo choices.

### **Perception, Meaning, and Age:**

Sometimes, there is not much thought that goes into a tattoo. Often, people just like a design and get the tattoo, not necessarily thinking about their identity (although subconsciously, I argue, their identity shaped their choice since the symbol/design sparked an interest). Whether this be from a flash sheet, a tattoo vending machine, or a drunken night, the deep thought behind a tattoo is not always necessary for certain individuals. Especially for those with full sleeves or a lot of tattoos, sometimes the thought behind the design is not as important. From my interviews, I concluded that this is because a person covering their body with so much ink makes certain tattoos not quite as meaningful anymore compared to someone with fewer tattoos, who attach more meaning to each of them. I assumed people with more tattoos would have an easier time answering my questions, but to my surprise, the person covered in tattoos who I interviewed had a more challenging time talking about their ink. I think this is because he covered his body with so much ink that certain tattoos are not quite as meaningful anymore compared to the interviewed person who just had two tattoos, who spoke about each of their meanings for a very long time. One participant stated, “There have been tattoos where I have sat on the design for

months, and those are the tattoos that I like the most” and then went on to say “I'm not anti-tattoo in any way, I'm just pro make sure you know what you really want to get and do your research and get tattooed by someone you genuinely feel safe and comfortable around” (Anna, 22).

Rushing into any permanent life decision is usually not a good idea. Tattoos take adequate time to acquire, and the more meaningful ones will likely be extensively thought through.

“Tattoos are really special in terms of reclaiming your body and having autonomy over how you present and what it is you look like. I know people in my life who have body modifications have done it very intentionally, either boosting their confidence or ‘that look’s cool and I want it on my body’ and they are conversation starters no matter what it is... [tattoos are] a cool way to make your body more yours, especially if you don’t feel like it is” (Kylee, 22).

One of my participants with full sleeves stated, “I think the biggest thing is to look at tattoos as a form of expressing yourself and not looking at it in a negative light. It’s a beautiful thing, and there are so many people I've connected with by having tattoos and others being inspired by seeing my tattoos. People might have been scared of getting one but then they see me and are inspired... so that could spark creativity” (Dylan, 26).

An emergent theme that came up in my data is the fact that people get tattoos for very personal reasons to them, but not necessarily realizing the correlation with their intersecting identities. However, I realized my question holds true and identity does play a super significant role in tattoo decisions. Even if someone has a personal reason to get a tattoo, like the Latin phrase one of my participants has in honor of her father, the act of getting painful ink into your skin- in any capacity- holds meaning to who you are as a person.





(Talia's tattoo)

The personal reasons someone would get a tattoo shapes their identity the same way that identity shapes their tattoo. A lot of participants say that they got a certain tattoo to represent a time in their life and place they were in mentally. Some of these people no longer love those tattoos, but at the time, it had a special meaning. I guess this leads me to wonder if identity changes over time, how are their feelings about their tattoos shifting as well? One participant said, "My first [tattoo] I did myself when I was 12... Some of them I [just] thought were cool,

but others were very meaningful... I may cover it one day” (Cathy, 45). This is why age is vital when choosing a tattoo design. The frontal lobe (important in impulse control, judgment, and decision making) is not fully developed until an individual reaches age 25 (Arain 2013). For this reason, age is a variable that must be considered when addressing tattoos.

In all of my study, there was one outlier, and that was in the 81-year-old woman who said her tattoo had less to do with her personal identity and more to do with her emotional identity. She stated that the tattoo represents something she feels more than someone she is. Yet, what someone feels can still be a part of their identity, and her responses are a good addition to my research. Age is such a prominent factor in a tattoo choice and the 81-year-old, expectedly, spoke more about her age than the other interviewees thus far.

Age plays a distinct role in where someone gets a tattoo. Some of my interviewees said they intentionally chose a part of the body where the skin is less likely to sag, while others stated that when they come to the age where their skin looks different, they probably will not care about how they look anyway, so placement was not a factor in terms of aging.

Age plays a role in what someone gets as well. Many people get tattoos of characters from a television show or movie they like, but will they like this same show/movie forever? The tattoos may not have the same significance over time, so age needs to be factored into tattoo decisions, especially for younger individuals.

For those searching for jobs or my participants younger than 40, the placement of the tattoo is very intentional. Talia, 39, said “professionally, the placement also, because the first school I worked at in California was a religious day school, and no one had tattoos showing, but they had tattoos. At my current school, my boss had knuckle tattoos! My mom (boomer generation) was saying that ‘Is it going to be a problem at work having tattoos that show?’ and

maybe if I was still in the Midwest, that would be the expectation, but everyone I work with now has tattoos. I'm not necessarily so bold that I wanted to have it showing all the time, like hand [tattoos]" (Talia, 39).

When talking about wrinkly or saggy skin being an issue, the 81 year old I interviewed said,

"I don't feel like the texture of my skin affects how it looks and I never worry about how it may look down the line. But I do understand warning young people about that because young people who get tramp stamps or who get tattoos in places that they're sorry that they got them, like on their neck, face, or head where it always will show and they might be sorry later and I understand that, but I respect young people to make that decision for themselves and hopefully they're making a wise decision and hopefully they consider the input from adults so they don't make a terrible mistake... yeah my skin's wrinkled but I don't care!" (Jamie, 81).



(Jamie's tattoo)

**Race:**

When I ask the basic question about race in my interviews, maybe it is the way I frame the question- “How do you identify in terms of race...”- but people- especially Jews- have been giving me very long and complicated answers. Out of the five Jewish people I first interviewed, three of them, who present Caucasian, have told me they do not identify as White. Josh said, “Race, I feel complicated about. Growing up as Jewish in the South, it was never super clear. Phenotypically, I’m very capable of being a white person, but I’ve been in a lot of situations where that whiteness is contingent on me acting a certain way and fitting into certain systems. Certainly, when I’m out here in Oregon, I would say probably white. Back home, depending on

where I am and who I'm with, it gets a little more complicated. My instinct is to say Ashkenazi, but I know that's more of an ethnicity" (Josh, 21). Josh's perspective on race was not unique just to them. Another interviewee said, "Race is a tricky one. Growing up, I would have always said White, but recently as I've gotten more in depth with my Jewish identity and how whiteness has been redefined in the last decade or so, where whiteness seems to be less about actual melanin content anymore and more about centralizing power and supremacy, that I think as Jewish people historically we haven't had. Sometimes I think I'm conditionally white, because there's many conditions where Jews are viewed as contaminants of whiteness, so then I'm not white, but on a form, sometimes I'll put other and write Jew. I go back and forth on whether Jews qualify as a race, because we've been racialized, by people who wish to do us harm... there's a genetic component... there's the flip of that, where at a traffic stop, or to law enforcement, I'm white. There are certain benefits or privileges afforded to me because of my appearance" (Talia, 39). Talia notes a good point, that there are privileges and opportunities presented to white people. But how does this racial identification play into tattoo decisions? Holly, one of my participants, stated "Tattoos always shift in society with how acceptable it is from a racial or class standpoint. Because now a lot of wealthy people have tattoos because it was very much a taboo, or low class, thing to be getting tattoos. Now, I feel like in society, it's kind of all over the place. Now, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds also have tattoos" (Holly, 39). The individual interviewed who wants to remain anonymous said, "My mom is half Japanese, so I have older Japanese family... they're still cultural and there's different opinions there... My mom has been open and accepting of me having tattoos, but it's pretty common among East Asian cultures to not find tattoos socially acceptable, and there are a lot of stigmas attached to that" (Anna, 22). Tradition in different races or cultures is important to consider when getting a

tattoo. The piece of art is for the individual on which the art is tattooed, but there may be social consequences due to the acceptability (or lack thereof) in a certain heritage.

Another participant, Kylee, got her tattoo at age 19 years old. The tattoo is Faye, a character from popular animated television show *Cowboy Bebop*. She remembers in the show,

“[Faye] gets a videotape she made as a kid to her future self and the sentiment of this scene is her as a cheerleader cheering for her future self... even though shes not currently the self that is making the video anymore, she will always be cheering for her future self as she goes on. In theory, every time I look at it, I’m reminded to be cheering for my future self and everything I am doing right now is for me now but also for me in the future” (Kylee, 22). Kylee also stated, “I feel like tattoos have kinda been, at least for me, a way to have autonomy over myself and what I wanna look like and how I wanna present myself. Also, the meaning of my tattoo is very relevant to me as a Black woman, like if no one’s gonna cheer for me, I gotta do it for myself. So race is probably the most important aspect to that” (Kylee, 22).



(Kylee's tattoo)

Kylee is a person of color, and living in the United States, which has a White majority, she stated how she has not always connected to the color of her skin. Tattoos allowed her to feel more herself in her skin, as she got to decorate herself with body art. The reason that racial identification is so important in this study particularly roots back to the eighteenth century, when white people specifically were told they needed to keep their “pure skin” (Putzi 2006). By tampering with the color and “purity” of the skin, one can be seen as deviant from the norm or rebellious. But for some, tattoos come with taking ownership over their racialized body and expressing a part of themselves that are really meaningful.

## Culture, Religion, and The Holocaust:

Religion plays a huge role in tattoo choices. For the Jewish people I interviewed, most made it clear that they did not want to speak on behalf of all Jewish people when asked questions about Jews reclaiming the meaning of a tattoo and could only speak from their personal experience. Many claimed that their personal religion, especially Judaism, had a large influence on their tattoo designs in terms of meaning, placement, style, and the artist they sought out.

One of my participants, Josh, has a Star of David tattooed on their chest. Josh intentionally contacted an Israeli tattoo artist living in Berlin to design their tattoos for them. Since Josh was not going to fly to Berlin to get their tattoo done, the artist connected them with someone in Seattle to get tattooed. Josh drove over five hours each way to get a tattoo, but the meaning was worth the gas and extra time to them. This is not an uncommon trend among my participants, as two other Jewish ones also sought out Jewish tattoo artists. Josh's Star of David was the first tattoo they got, and is made from "Hebrew calligraphy, which translates to 'to work it and to keep it', it's an excerpt from a verse in Genesis. The full verse... references the Garden of Eden. I got it right after I turned 18" (Josh, 21).

WORK IT AND TAKE CARE OF IT  
(GENESIS 2:15)



HEBREW  
TATTOOS

(Josh's first tattoo design)

"At that time I was doing a lot of environmental advocacy work in Atlanta... I was involved in some Jewish agriculture spaces. I still feel very strongly about the

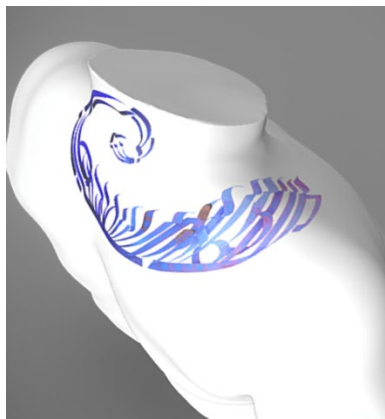


environment and taking care of the planet that we have and one day hope to be in deep relationship with land in that way again... it felt like a nice way... to be reminded of the joy and exploration and new experiences of that moment and the deep relationships coming out of that moment (coming into myself as a person and graduating high school)” (Josh, 21).



(Josh's tattoo)

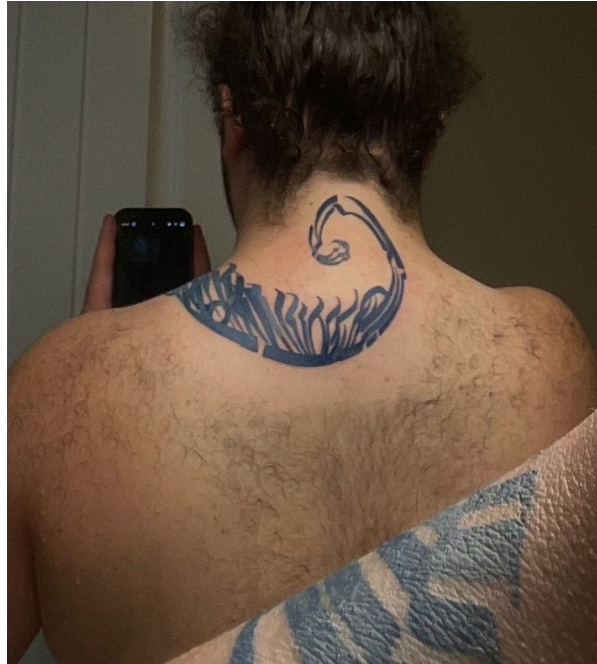
Their second tattoo also holds Jewish values. They got it “this past summer with the same artist working on the design. It is a spiral along my neck and right trapezius muscle. It's Hebrew translates to ‘a small light can repel great darkness’” (Josh, 21).



(Josh's second tattoo design)

“Both of my pieces were done in actual calligraphy with ink on paper first and then turned into a tattoo. Both tattoos are blue and represent water. It starts over water at the base of my neck and this part represents clear moments when that chain is broken or damaged and then gets repaired over time, and as it comes

around to the front, it symbolizes me taking my place in that chain and it gets much lighter and clearer” (Josh, 21).



(Josh's tattoo)

“I chose to get that piece in this moment because over the past two years or so, I've spent a lot of time at Hillel and a lot of time finding more of the ways that are meaningful for me in connecting with my Judaism outside of nature and finding that Judaism in my relationship with people and not just in the world around me—really figuring out what my place in that chain looks like. That's been a really healing experience for me and it took a lot of learning and great conversations... it has resulted in a shift for me in my perspective to my relationship with Judaism to something that was really painful and caused a lot of problems for me when I was younger dealing with a lot of intense antisemitism in the South to something that has become more of a source of strength and security and identity; And in community— a source of hope when things are looking not so great like they are at the moment. The decision to pursue rabbinic school makes these tattoos powerful reminders of where I was when I got it and what my role and relationships with people in the world and Judaism look like” (Josh, 21).

Josh got these tattoos to represent parts of themselves and their life that are meaningful identity markers to them. In correspondence with their strong connection to Judaism, they were able to express the meaning of their religion to them through the ink. Clearly both well thought out, these tattoos are strong indicators of Josh's sense of pride in their identity.

Like Josh, one of my participants, Talia, has a meaningful tattoo that correlates to her religion. She said,

“Pretty quickly... I knew I wanted a Hamsa. It is a Jewish symbol, but also used in Christianity and Islam- The three fingers of it are supposed to represent all three of the religions. I've always loved the shape and the design; I love how simple they can be or really intricate. The first time I ever had a Hamsa shape was a necklace I got from the Jewish quarter on a school trip in Spain. I remember choosing it for myself and I always connected with that design or shape. So, my second tattoo is a Hamsa” (Talia, 39).



(Talia's tattoo)

Talia then decided to get another tattoo shortly after the hamsa. “My most recent tattoo was motivated by grief and feeling really dysregulated on October 7th” (Talia, 39). October 7th, 2023, marked the day when Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, starting a heinous war.

Hamas kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered innocent civilians of Israel and there are still hostages in captivity to this day. “On my list of things I've always wanted or had been thinking of getting, I always wanted Am Yisrael Chai,” which translates to “The People of Israel Live” (Talia, 39).



(Talia's tattoo)

“On Oct 7, I had the weirdest day ever. I woke up to the horrible news of everything going on in Israel and it felt like that whole day was in a fugue state-reaching out to all my friends in Israel making sure everyone was okay, and yet at

the same time, I was here, in LA, and life was just kind of going on... I was overcome by a feeling of 'I'm gonna go right now.' I need to escape this feeling, and a tattoo is a great way to do that... It was beautiful and I loved it and it felt like the most I could possibly do in a really powerless situation... when people see it- especially Jewish people- they clock it quickly and it makes them happy, and a lot of times they ask 'when did you get that' and when I tell them I went on the 7th, a lot of people are like 'woah.' It felt like the best coping mechanism I could think of' (Talia, 39).

When something tragic happens and a person is a step or two removed from the situation, they can feel extremely powerless. What can I do from all the way over here about this issue about which I care so deeply?, one might ask themselves. Talia's tattoos hold great significance in relation to her Judaism with past and current events being significant factors that influenced her markings.

Another participant noted his experience with tattoos in relation to identity. Jake, 22, has three tattoos, but one holds more significance to him than the rest.

"My last tattoo is on the back of my shoulder blade, and it is my most meaningful tattoo. I got it when I was 21, about a year ago. I always knew I wanted something that represented the communities that I am a part of, because I am Jewish and I'm also gay... they're pretty big aspects of my identity... Part of the reason why I get tattoos in the first place is because I feel like I am reclaiming that aspect of life because a lot of Jewish people look down on getting tattoos, and I kind of see it as a protest to what that signifies, just because the reasoning a lot of people have for it is that tattoos were used in the Holocaust to label us, but I have the freedom because of my ancestors and because of the people that fought for their freedom that I can now do something with my body how I please, and I can do whatever I want and celebrate my body by putting art on it if I want to. I can put art on it for whatever reason I want. The actual tattoo itself is a High, which signifies 'life' in Hebrew, and surrounding that is an upside-down triangle, which is what they used to label gay people with instead of a number in the Holocaust... so part of that reclaiming is me celebrating my life however I want" (Jake, 22).



(Jake's tattoo)

For Jake, getting a tattoo to symbolize his personal individuality was a meaningful statement. He thought thoroughly through his exact choice for the ink, and felt a sense of liberation from his ancestor's horrifying past by getting a tattoo that represents his intersecting identities as a gay man and as a Jewish person.

For some, finding a tattoo artist in their same religion is key to making sure they feel comfortable and safe. Holly told me, “I did get a tattoo on my birthday that I was [questioning afterward]... I was trying to find a Jewish artist and I couldn’t find one in the Bay Area... I got a birthday cake tattoo by this one artist (not Jewish) who I liked, but then I started to see the stuff she was liking on Instagram and then she unfollowed me after October 7th... I might get it removed in the future” (Holly, 39). The shift in one’s relationship to their tattoo depending on who their artist is as a person makes sense. This is the same concept behind separating the art from the artist in music. A music artist who is a terrible human in their personal life will be less likely to have as large of a following as they did before the allegations or bad press came out about them. Yet, some people think separating the art from the artist is essential to see the beauty in the music. Holly disagrees.

Formatively, Jews played an integral part in tattoo history. Holly explained how

“The tattoo industry in the US was pretty much started by Jews- secular Jews- and I don’t think this was a reclaiming, but it’s a very interesting aspect of it because it goes counter to the religion... I think it’s fascinating that it’s been pretty much erased that Jews have been such an integral part of the tattoo industry, like the making of the actual gun, and flash is an invention by Lew the Jew Alberts... Ed Hardy made a book about him because he’s one of the founding fathers of flash tattoos. I think we’re not advertising that Jews had anything to do with tattoos because it’s against the religion... any erasure of anti-Semitism... You hear about the other people, but you don’t hear about Jewish people... it’s just taboo in Jewish culture” (Holly, 39). Holly goes on to say, “But with the Holocaust stuff, I’ve seen people get their family member’s or someone they were close to’s number... I don’t think I was thinking about that when I got my tattoos, but I think it’s very powerful” (Holly, 39).

Holly’s tattoo to represent her Jewish roots is shown below:



(Holly's tattoo)

I told my Jewish participants during my interviews the fact that the Torah says one is not supposed to mark their flesh intentionally and there is a myth that one cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery with tattoos. I asked for their thoughts on this topic and alluded to the respect factor of getting ink, either to the religion itself or their ancestors/heritage (See Appendix, Questions 13 and 14). Alyssa noted that “By the time I got my tattoo, I had already started my self study... not all Jewish cemeteries allow tattoos, [so that was a big factor]. I am not Orthodox and will never be Orthodox, and unless you're trying to be buried in an Orthodox cemetery, most of them allow it.” (Alyssa, 19). But burials are only a small piece of this permanent decision for most Jews. Holocaust tattoos were a way of branding people. It is similar to the US in branding



people in prison with a number. However, I want to draw the connection clearly and make clear that tattooing someone's skin is way more harmful than printing a number on a jumpsuit. Jake said, "I respect [Jewish] people who don't want to reclaim tattoos by putting it on their own bodies, but it's not their place to judge others. I believe in bodily autonomy for someone's own individual, so I believe in live and let live and that is something that should be emphasized" (Jake, 22).

Some individuals choose to get Star of David tattoos to represent a part of their strong Jewish identity. One participant, Dylan, said, "I think everyone has their own meaning for a tattoo. If you're getting a Jewish star or something in Hebrew to honor your heritage, it is a beautiful thing" (Dylan, 26). When asked about the star tattoos, Alyssa, another one of my Jewish participants, stated, "I have mixed feelings about people having Magen David tattoos. I've thought about having one myself, but possibly that's a step too much... Before [Jews] were tattooed, they had to wear the patches with the star, and I feel like in some way it's sort of like branding yourself a Jew, which I'm not sure is a bad thing. Wearing my necklace is sort of branding myself as a Jew, like I'm very open that I'm Jewish, so that could be proclaiming myself a Jew." (Alyssa, 19). While the decision of "branding" oneself is of great magnitude, it is important in protecting the Jewish population to wear your star with pride and label yourself as Jewish when appropriate. If we all hide away, Hamas and all antisemites in the world get exactly what they want- for the Jewish population to be completely eliminated. But we are not going anywhere.

Inscribing text or a symbol onto your body forever is a big decision to make. The meaning of these religious tattoos is so important to the person's life that even against what the Torah advises (not to mark your body), they made the choice to put permanent, meaningful ink

on their skin. More than half of my participants in my research study are Jewish, so I was able to see the way this played out within every Jewish individual interviewed.

Tattoos can provide a source of healing from trauma for individuals. The Holocaust, for example, was very traumatic. Even if younger generations of Jewish people did not experience the traumas themselves, intergenerational trauma is very real and difficult to manage. Josh stated, “To me, part of healing from trauma is recognizing that something doesn't have power over you anymore and recognizing that you have power over it and the memories of it that you still carry” (Josh, 21). The healing process with which ink therapy helps individuals can be accredited to the long history of tattoos and making meaning out of the artwork. These tattoos serve as the individual recognizing that they went through this trauma, and are using the art to reclaim themselves, as they are more powerful than what has happened to them. The ink itself cannot speak, but the meaning behind a tattoo is very loud.

## Conclusion

The research of tattoos' connection with identity is vastly important in understanding how our culture, upbringing, and personal traits shape our self-expression and life overall. People will view others differently depending on the way they outwardly express themselves, and if the expression properly correlates with one's internal identity, they are able to live their truth. Understanding the relationship between tattoos and identity better and the reasons people decide to get permanent body art to represent parts of themselves is extremely important in comprehending the social workings and trends that make up U.S. communities.

This study is also intended to provide assistance and a way out of struggling for individuals who suffer through trauma and want to find a way to heal. Tattoo therapy is a real concept, and by getting ink to represent one's struggles, they can heal from their past. Tattoos like the semicolon, Medusa, and butterfly are especially powerful to provide strength after a trauma.

For nine out of ten participants, identity played a role in their tattoo choices. The most significant identity sectors to tattoos were gender and religion, although race, class, and sexuality were also contributors. Individuals who struggle with connecting to their true self due to the color of their skin (race) or body parts with which they were born (gender) felt like their tattoos provided them with a sense of bodily autonomy and power. For Jewish people specifically, thoughts surrounding The Holocaust were crucial in thinking about the respect to their ancestors and to the religion. Yet, through a reclamation of power and self, Jewish individuals were able to find meaning in making their flesh a canvas for permanent art.

There were few limitations to my research for my thesis. Some people were reluctant to open up about their tattoo experiences and personal identities or were hesitant to talk to me at all,

so my research was slightly limited. Yet, my research questions allowed for an expansion of their mind and an opening up of ideas surrounding their tattoos (See Appendix for questions). Most participants answered thoroughly, but some did not want to share the personal meaning behind their ink, only what the ink was itself. Additionally, this project had a relatively short timeline, so the amount of people I interviewed was unfortunately limited. This limitation to my study is the sample size. I was only able to interview ten people, and am limited in my representativeness of the study due to this. Ideally, this project has the potential to expand and become a research study with over 1,000 interviews to get a very representative idea about tattoo cultures and identity. There is definitely capacity for growth upon participants if someone was carrying out this study for an extended period of time and had access to people worldwide. My accessibility to a diverse, wide variety of individuals to interview was limited due to my current location and lack of funding for this project. I utilized my resources to the best of my abilities with people who fit my participant criteria. There is much room for expansion on this project in the future for either me or other researchers to fulfill.

## Appendix

### Recruitment Script:

Do you have a story behind your tattoos? My name is Sasha, and for my senior Honors College thesis, I am researching the connection between identity and tattoos.

Participation requirements-

Must be at least 18 years old

Must have at least one tattoo

Must be comfortable sharing about personal identity and upbringing (e.g. religion, sexuality, age, etc.)

Must be willing to have interview over Zoom or in person for approximately 30 minutes

Must be comfortable letting me publish your story in thesis project (can remain anonymous if desired)

### Informed Consent:

Informed consent statement: I invite you to participate in a brief research study about why people get particular tattoos, and how this intersects with race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, culture, etc.. There will also be a section on The Holocaust and how Jewish people are reclaiming the meaning of a tattoo.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be asked to take part in a 30-minute-long interview to provide personal insight, stories and experiences about your tattoos. It is expected that your participation will last throughout the interview, and I will contact you up to six months after for follow-up questions. With consent, you will be asked to have your tattoo(s) photographed and published in the study to support this research.

There are no known risks to you from taking part in this research and no foreseeable direct benefit to you either. However, it is hoped that the research will help people understand the significance of a tattoo through your personal story.

Participation is voluntary, and it is up to you whether or not to participate.

If you have any questions regarding this research, contact Sasha Kaplow ([skaplow6@uoregon.edu](mailto:skaplow6@uoregon.edu)). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Research Compliance Services at the University of Oregon at (541) 346-2510 or [researchcompliance@uoregon.edu](mailto:researchcompliance@uoregon.edu).

Your verbal agreement indicates that:

You are over the age of 18,

You have heard and understood the information provided,

And that you willingly agree to participate.

Please answer all of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to participate

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not wish to participate

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to be audio and/or video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not wish to be audio and/or video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to have photographs of my tattoo(s) in published results.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not agree to have photographs of my tattoo(s) in published results.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to my name being used in published results.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not agree to my name being used in published results.

## Interview Questions:

1. What is your name and age?
2. Where are you from and where do you live now?
3. How many tattoos do you have and what is their meaning? How old were you when you got your first one?
4. How much does external perception of tattoos relate to your decisions to get one? If you lived in a different region (maybe a more religious one, for example,) do you think you still would have gotten your tattoo(s)?
5. How do you identify in terms of race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and religion?
6. Between race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and religion, which identity do you think most significantly impacted your tattoo(s) and how/why?
7. Which other part of your identity do you feel most has impacted your tattoo choices? How?
8. Do you feel like your upbringing in terms of class status, race, and religion had to do with your tattoo decisions?
9. Walk me through your process of getting a tattoo. (How long do you sit on an idea, how do you find your artist, etc.)?
10. Have you ever gotten a tattoo without thinking much about it first (e.g. drunken night, flash sheet, tattoo vending machine)? Tell me the story.
11. (For Jews-) Did you have any family members in the Holocaust? Did they get tattoos?
12. (For Jews-) Do you think Jewish people are reclaiming the meaning of a tattoo after the tragedies of The Holocaust? If so, how?
13. (For Jews-) Have you heard this myth about not being able to be buried in a Jewish cemetery? How does this relate to your perception of people with tattoos?
14. Do you have plans to get more tattoos (have you decided on designs yet)?
15. Knowing my topic, do you have anything else you would like to share / you want me to walk away with?
16. Is there anyone else you can recommend I interview?

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