

# Tattoos as Forms of Self-Expression for LGBTQ+ Individuals

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to research to learn more about what tattoos can offer a person within the LGBTQ+ community in their journey of self-expression or acceptance. The interviews conducted were centered around the following questions; How do tattoos affect a person's self-esteem differently? How do body modifications help LGBTQ+ individuals define themselves? In what ways do tattoos offer a therapeutic experience? Is there some sort of relief after someone completes another tattoo? Participants shared their personal experiences within tattoo shops, how they feel their tattoos have shaped their journey of healing, and how the world of tattoos is shifting in a new direction. This research helped to provide the narrative that LGBTQ+ individuals can use tattoos as forms of self-expression, tools for self-acceptance, and personal healing.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tattoos can have many different meanings within a society. For some people, it is a cultural statement, expressing religious devotion and gratitude. It can be a symbol of a cultural group, one that has years of history of the tradition. For others, it is a means of visualizing their personal story and growth permanently on their skin. Some people may like to only have one or a few, and others may create murals of art on their skin. Regardless, tattoos can be used as tools to aid people in defining themselves, their personalities, and their lifestyles through modes that some call body enhancement or body mutilation. For some people in the LGBTQ+ community, however, tattoos hold a different purpose.

Many individuals within the LGBTQ+ community have had to face worlds of adversity in their lifetimes. Being a group that is heavily stigmatized within society, queer people have been conditioned to make themselves smaller for the comfort of others who might find their

identity to be shameful. However, some people within the LGBTQ+ community use tattoos as a way to be seen in a society that oftentimes makes them feel invisible. Tattoos can serve as a symbol of transition, so they can signify a transition of coming out, self-acceptance, or their journey (Huang, 2016, pg. 85). Many people also get tattoos as a way to feel in control, in a society where their lives and their rights are topics of politics (Pitts, 2016).

Both the world of tattoos and the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals have been regarded heavily as deviant. Having a queer identity meant going against the heteronormative ideals of society while having tattoos has been met with stereotypes of being delinquent. Both having tattoos and being queer have been met with stigma. Over time, especially in the last two decades, things seem to be changing. More and more people are living their lives openly queer, and aren't afraid to truly be themselves. There are huge turnouts at the Pride Parades every June, which are moving into the smaller towns as well. While it is comforting to know that more people feel comfortable expressing their authentic selves, there is still a large stigma surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. The same could be said for the tattoo community. While we see many people getting very visible tattoos, and are proud to express themselves using tattoos, they may still be met with social stereotypes and judgment.

In this study, I aim to find the deeper meaning behind how LGBTQ+ individuals use tattoos as modes of self-expression and self-acceptance. In the existing sociological research, authors, such as articles by Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko, focus more on the social implications and stereotypes of having tattoos and don't venture into how these tattoos can help marginalized people in their lives. Regardless of the level to which people find tattoo modification attractive, they serve as modifications that the host can control, and allows that person to alter their appearance in ways that they feel comfortable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Presentation of Self, the Heterosexual Imaginary, and the Stigmatization of Queer Bodies**

A common phenomenon within the LGBTQ+ community is the idea that we have to hide or lessen ourselves to be accepted by the wider society. This shared experience among queer individuals leads us to struggle with being openly proud of ourselves and our identities, in fear that we may be discriminated against or harassed for our loudness. Erving Goffman writes about this phenomenon of presenting a “perfect image” in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956. In this book, he discusses how people will put on a performance. They will only present a version of themselves that they believe will be accepted in certain social contexts. He writes, “This report is not concerned with aspects of theater that creep into everyday life. It is concerned with the structure of social encounters - the structure of those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter one another’s immediate physical presence” (Goffman, 1956, pg.10). He explains that this idea of the presentation of self is present in every social interaction. We show what we think will be accepted.

For queer people, this presentation is often one that passes as “straight” or “cis.” We try to align with gender roles and stereotypes, ones that will allow people to believe that we are “normal.” In the *Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender*, Chrys Ingraham suggests that the heterosexual imaginary reinforces heterosexuality as the norm. It supports the idea of the gender binary, as well as the gender roles that come with that binary. The heterosexual imaginary also reinforces the belief that a man and a woman being together is the correct and moral scenario. Ingraham believes that this allows for the exclusion of genders, or sexualities, outside of the binary, or outside of heterosexuality. The imaginary enforces gender roles and strengthens the patriarchy (Ingraham, 1994).

Queer people are constantly being told that they are morally wrong for their identities. Not only may there be people around them telling them this, such as poor representations of the Catholic church, who might conduct radical and violent protests on college campuses, but the government is as well. More recently, there has been an incredibly harmful “Don’t Say Gay” bill that was being discussed in the Florida House of Representatives. This bill, which was backed by the Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, would limit classroom discussions on sexual orientation and gender identity. The bill also encourages parents to sue schools or teachers that speak about these topics in the classroom. Not only is this bill harmful to the LGBTQ+ students of Florida, but it is also erasing the history of the culture and movements of the LGBTQ+ community in the Floridian curriculum programs (Thornton, 2022). While some aspects of this bill have not been accepted, it is still harmful to know that your state’s government is attempting to work against you.

This bill, before being brought to the house floor, contained an amendment that has since been withdrawn. This particular amendment stated that if a child were to come out as a sexual orientation other than straight, schools would be required to out the child to their parents. The understanding that these students will unwillingly have their identity shared with people if they “break the norm” reinforces Ingraham’s theory of the heterosexual imaginary. The Florida House of Representatives and the State Governor believe that it is their right to share such personal information against the child’s will, simply because it exists outside of their idea of normal.

Another good example of the heterosexual imaginary is the institution of marriage. For the longest time, same-sex marriage was illegal in the United States. Not only did this enforce the idea that only heterosexual relationships were valid and moral, but restricted the people in same-sex couples from getting married legally. To this day, some people will assume that

everyone is straight, that being straight is the standard or most normalized label to have. In my experience, I have only ever been asked if I, who is feminine presenting, has a boyfriend or when I am going to get married and have kids. When my answer to having a boyfriend is “no,” there are no follow-up questions on my relationship status. To the people asking me this question, having a boyfriend is the only option I have for a relationship, and being in a queer relationship is not something that they believe to be a possibility.

### **The Deviant Perception of Tattoos**

In American society, we may be shown in various ways that people with tattoos are people to steer clear of. Some believe that tattoos have a negative connotation. People may be told not to get tattoos for fear of not being hireable, but we are often told that the people who have tattoos are deviant in nature.

In studies conducted surrounding college students, and their perception of tattoos, sociologists have found that tattoos symbolize people forming their adult identities. In, *To Ink or Not to Ink: The Meaning of Tattoos Among College Students*, the authors, Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko found that among 452 undergraduate students they surveyed, 195 of them had tattoos, and the remaining 257 did not. It was found that the tattooed respondents got their first tattoos as tributes to loved ones, symbols of important transitions in their lives, symbols of personal growth, and most commonly as a way to form their identity and self-expression. Of the people who didn't have any tattoos, they said that they were worried about the permanency of the tattoos, or were concerned with the cost (Dickson, Dukes, Smith, Strapko; 2015). In the article titled, *Stigma of Ink: Tattoo attitudes among college students*, Dickson, Dukes, Smith, and Strapko found similar results. Through the use of two structural equation models, one for the stigma against tattooed persons and one for stigma victimization, the authors found that

individuals with tattoos who were stigmatized against or were shamed for their tattoos were more likely to have them removed or cover them up. The greater the stigma they faced, the more likely they were to conceal this part of them.

Although it is an upsetting concept to confront, your identity, worth, and interactions you have with others are all affected by your physical appearance. Sociologist Clinton Sanders writes, “People use appearance to place each other into categories, which aid in the anticipation and interpretation of behavior, and to make decisions about how best to coordinate social activities” (Sanders, 1989, 1). As we move through the world, we are constantly being judged for our appearances. When you couple this theory with the known stigma against tattoos, you can understand the intense stigma that tattooed individuals face. “The tattooed person is variously described as ‘simple-minded,’ ‘immature,’ ‘hostile,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘self-destructive,’ ‘untrustworthy,’ and ‘infantile’” (Sanders, 1989, 37). Because there is continued research, some of which is categorizing tattooed individuals as being deviant or gang-related, the societal bias can continue to generalize all tattooed people into these boxes.

Sanders refers to tattoos as “conventionally regarded as a stigma symbol” (Sanders, 1989, 58). When you acquire a tattoo, you come to a personal understanding that this mark will affect how you move through life afterward. It changes your physical appearance and therefore will alter the social perception of you from your community. A tattoo will often allow someone to perceive you as affiliated with a subculture, such as motorcyclists, or a gang. This is part of the social stigma surrounding tattoos. One mark will allow someone to completely change their perception of you, and instead base their opinions and perceptions on a stereotype. Stigma provides for misinformed judgments and allows for preconceived notions about who a person is and what they stand for.

## **A Social Shift in Tattoos**

As times change, so does the perception of many things that were once considered to be “deviant.” There was a time when women wearing trousers was unimaginable and was considered abnormal for going against gender norms; The same idea can apply to tattoos. Although they may still be regarded with judgment and bias, tattooing has transformed into an art form of its own. We see this shift in various areas of tattoo culture. While tattooing was once considered a pedestrian craft, with one distinct art style and no real art training necessary, we can now see people obtaining art degrees, and cultivating a following of people interested in their unique style of art (Kosut, 2006). This acceptance of a legitimate art form can be attributed in part to mainstream media’s representation of tattoos, which Kosut outlines in *An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos*. With social media and the entertainment industry, we can see our favorite celebrities proudly show off their ink, which is mass spread to the world. As we see this in our everyday media consumption, tattoos are normalized, or even viewed as something that can bring these two worlds together (Kosut, 2006).

The shift we are experiencing from tattoos only being signs of deviance to now being socially accepted forms of art is due to the shifting values of the culture and society we are living in. Things are viewed as deviant based on the time in which we are living. As stated previously, things that were considered deviant in the last century are now a part of our everyday lives. Tattoos are no different. In certain contexts, some Americans accept tattoos as art and leave the idea that they are signs of criminality, and deviance in the past (Kosut, 2013).

## **Tattoos as Symbols of Self-Expression in the LGBTQ+ Community**

This study aims to find the connection and meaning behind getting tattoos for LGBTQ+ individuals. In the article titled, *Ink in the Flesh: Navigating Tattooing, Identity, and the Body for*

*LGBTQ2+ BIPOC Individuals Western*, the author aims to discover how the bodies of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals use tattoos as forms of self-expression, and how it aids in the formation of their identities. This researcher found that many of the people they were interviewing had tattoos facing inwards. These participants revealed that these tattoos were for themselves (Pasadilla). A common misconception about many people with tattoos is that tattoos are for the world to see. This study showed that tattoos can aid in the journey of the host. The tattoos are reminders for that person of how far they have come, and where they are going, and help them through life.

Tattoos, while a painful procedure, can offer a therapeutic experience. Many LGBTQ+ individuals say that tattoos offered them a form of healing, in that they were shaping their own identities. Huang shares their experiences of how tattoos have specifically helped them through recognizing their queer and trans identities (Huang). According to the author, there is some sort of relief that comes after getting a tattoo. It is just another reminder that they are controlling how they are perceived, rather than having it all decided for them. Tattoos may help the host heal from a traumatic event, like losing a loved one, or may offer therapy for coming to terms with something traumatic (Alter-Muri, 2019). Many people get tattoos to commemorate a loss, and this can offer a feeling of accepting the grief, and moving forward with the person you have become. Many queer people may use tattoos to provide them with a therapy of commemorating a journey of self-expression; Of showcasing how far they have come in their journey.

Finally, tattoos allow some people the opportunity to shock society by allowing them to alter their looks so severely. Many body modifiers enjoy being seen as different and use the modifications as a way to shock society. They create images and use their bodies to tell a story. They use their body modifications as a means to oppose the hetero dominant culture that is

prevalent in our society (Pitts). By altering their bodies to exist outside of the western standard of beauty, and outside the heteronormative idea of gender and sexuality, people can truly express themselves to reflect their identity.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To answer the question of how LGBTQ+ identifying individuals use tattoos as a form of self-expression and self-acceptance, I engaged in in-depth interviews with four people, all from different backgrounds, but with the shared experience of being queer. I was especially wanting to speak with transgender and non-binary/gender fluid individuals, as I strongly felt that our voices are often silenced within the LGBTQ+ community. I also wanted to speak with some tattoo artists, to gain their specific insight on the evolving culture of tattoos and their experience in tattooing a diverse population.

I felt that interviewing around four people would provide me with more than enough information and data to help answer my research questions. I was able to do this by asking direct and open-ended questions, while also providing a safe space for these stories to be shared. Holding in-depth interviews is the best option for this study because every person has a different experience, which could not be fully shared through quantitative data collection, such as surveys or questionnaires. It was found that a comforting and trusting alliance between interviewer and participant can lead to the most successful interview (Weiss, 1995). Since I know the participants personally, and we have close relationships, the answers and information provided in the interviews were open and honest. They were able to give me real responses that helped to inform my research greatly.

When starting the process, I looked to the many queer people in my life who truly love the art of tattooing. I knew that I would be able to have more casual conversations with these people. For a larger outreach, I looked to individuals with whom I had a mutual connection with, or who I only knew on a professional level, such as my tattoo artist and her colleagues.

To gauge what type of questions I would have needed to ask, I had very casual conversations with two very close friends of mine. The first conversation I had was with my friend who identifies as queer, uses she/her pronouns, and is Black. She is currently 21 years old and is a college student. In our conversation, she shared with me why she chose to get tattoos, as well as the importance they have to her experience. She grew up in a very conservative town, where there were confederate flags hung outside of every household. She was one of three Black students in her graduating high school class. She found comfort in listening to some queer artists of color, who she seemed to share many experiences with. Her arm is covered in song lyrics, symbols representing album titles, track names, and album cover designs. Her forearm is decorated with a portrait of her favorite queer artist. This tattoo is the one that covers her self-harm scars. She explained to me that this artist is the one that saved her life and that when she was contemplating taking her own life, his songs brought her a sense of relief. To her, these tattoos were a tribute to him and a representation of how far she had come in her journey of self-acceptance.

The second person I briefly spoke with is another friend of mine, who identifies as non-binary. This person came out as gay in middle school, and non-binary while in college. They explained to me that they enjoy androgyny, and like pulling inspiration from traditionally masculine and feminine ideas when choosing clothes. This person not only gets art tattooed on them but is an artist as well. Their main focus is on creating portraits of people who don't seem

to align with any stereotypical representations of gender. They also reflect this art style in their tattoos. All of their tattoos show forms of androgyny. They explained to me that this helps them to see the beauty of their identity.

By having these brief, yet insightful conversations with some of my closest friends, I was able to understand more clearly how queer people use tattoos in their journey to self-acceptance. These casual conversations allowed me to develop some questions for the interviews I was planning to conduct.

When I first approached the interviewing process, I ran into a few complications. Some of the people who originally agreed to meet were no longer able to participate due to schedule constraints. I was interested in interviewing a specific tattoo artist, but due to their hefty schedule, and overload of clients, they could no longer be included in this study. Although I don't have the number of participants I was originally hoping for, I feel that the data I was able to retrieve has provided a great amount of information to be used in this study. I originally wanted to interview people of many ages, which is something else that I feel I wasn't able to accomplish.

To gather my participants, I used convenience sampling. There were people I already had in mind to speak with, who were accessible and willing to participate. After reaching out to them, and scheduling our interviews, we were able to get into a comfortable conversation. To maintain confidentiality, I will be referring to these four participants as Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, and Participant D.

## **FINDINGS**

Participant A is 26 years old, uses she/her pronouns, is a tattoo artist, and has approximately 60 tattoos. At the beginning of our conversation, I asked questions pertaining to

her work as a tattoo artist, her experience with stigma in the tattoo industry, as well as her perception of the history of tattooing. Participant A explained that, from her point of view, tattooing was an outlet for people who have served time to commemorate that time served. These people could be military personnel, those who have been incarcerated, or people affiliated with gangs. Tattooing was not considered to be an art form until more recently. She explained how more and more tattoo artists are getting art degrees, but that is not a requirement to become a tattoo artist. Participant A disclosed that she doesn't have any sort of art background, but knows there are artists in her shop that have obtained fine arts degrees.

Although the narrative is shifting into a more positive light, she finds that she still faces a stigma for being a tattooed person. Before deciding to pursue a career in tattooing, Participant A was hopeful for a career as a nurse. To be seen as sterile, she was very careful in where she would place her tattoos. As a society-facing professional, she felt that having visible tattoos would give the impression to patients and other medical professionals that she was unsterile. After deciding to make the change to becoming a tattoo artist, she felt comfortable being tattooed in more visible areas of her body. While she personally felt confident to do so, the people around her were not hesitant to make stigmatized comments. She disclosed to me that people would approach her and ask if she hated herself, or if she got these tattoos to cover up what she didn't like. People would tell her that she was ruining her body by making these modifications. She continued, "This is my body, and I am going to express myself in the way that I feel comfortable doing... You know, I love the way that I look. I have worked hard and paid a lot of money to look the way that I do."

When it comes to her work as a tattoo artist, she makes it a priority to make her clients feel safe and comfortable, "I do have a pride flag that hangs in my station so that people will

immediately see that and may feel some kind of sense of relief or feel welcomed. Creating a space for anybody to feel welcome is something that I pride myself in because as a queer person who is also on the larger side, I struggled with my own body issues...I want to walk into a space where I feel comfortable or where I'm not looked at differently, and I want to do that for other people too." When asked about what an unsafe tattoo environment might look like, Participant A continued, "I would say a lot of old school tattoo artists and old school shops where you're sitting in a room with a bunch of old dudes that have been in the industry for like 20 plus years. Their mindsets more times than not have not changed. They want to tattoo these tough burly guys that are just like them." This leaves the impression that people who don't fit the standard mold of being a stereotypically masculine man may find themselves feeling uncomfortable, or even unsafe in these shops.

Participant A was very excited to share her tattoos that are inspired by her personal fascination with the female form, "I actually have a pomegranate that's on my leg that has a vagina in it. I have always had a fascination with the female body, not only as a whole but also having my own issues with my body and self-confidence, and body positivity. I also have a very large mermaid on my leg who is curvy and has huge tits and she is beautiful." Although she has not explored the sapphic aspect of her sexuality, she is very open with her appreciation for the female form. By permanently marking herself with these declarations of her sexual identity, she is not only solidifying her identity but proclaiming to the world that she is proud of who she is; That she doesn't feel ashamed to be herself.

Participant B is 20 years old, uses She/They pronouns, and is a college student. She currently has approximately 25 tattoos. Participant B clarified that while they do use she/they pronouns, she feels incredibly fluid both sexually, and in gender as well. She explained that she

has been getting tattoos since she was 16 years old, and it started as getting stick and poke tattoos from friends. While this is not the usual practice, especially in receiving tattoos from teenagers, the tattoo she received was reflective of that time of her life, “It’s a rain cloud because I was sad and emo. And that’s what you do when you’re sad and emo... It’s one of my favorite tattoos.” From a young age, she showcased the desire to have tattoos. She explained that she was always the one drawing on her arms in a sharpie, creating designs across her skin.

Tattoos are an outlet that can be used to empower the host. Participant B explains their use for the modification, “I have tattoos in basically every spot of my body that I feel self-conscious about. If I’ve ever been uncomfortable about a part of my body, I’ve gotten a tattoo there. It’s almost like beautifying that part of me.” Participant B is actively using tattoos as a mode of self-acceptance. For the parts of her body that she feels are unsatisfactory, she instead uses the art of her choice to go in that spot and enhance the area. Tattoos are commonly referred to as body modifications, but can also act as body enhancements.

Participant B explained that, while they don’t have tattoos directly representing their identity as a queer person, they use their tattoos to symbolize this aspect of their identity, “Most of [my tattoos] are about originality and being yourself, so me being myself is me being queer. Tattoos allow me to express myself, and sexuality and gender are a part of that. They help me feel more comfortable in the body I’m in.” Tattoos allow them to feel secure in themselves and their identity, being queer is just a part of that.

She also explained why she is particular about the environment she gets tattooed in, “There have been shop environments where I feel really uncomfortable that are filled with really scary dudes. I feel like that’s where tattoos come from though in that era of tattooers. Tattooing

has always had this stereotype of being rough and tumble and for tough people.” It is important to recognize that not all people are safe in every room they walk into, especially queer folks.

Speaking with Participant C was an important contribution to this study, for her identity as a Black woman in America. She is 21 years old, uses she/her pronouns, is a student, and has approximately 40 tattoos. She describes herself as “divinely feminine,” believing herself to be in touch with her womanhood and the body she was meant to be in. She explained that people may decide to place labels like “bisexual” or “pansexual” on her, which doesn’t bother her, but she likes to say that she has no label. She is attracted to who she is attracted to, and there isn’t a specific gender attached to that.

Tattoos hold a special place in her heart, as she grew up battling with self-harm. She describes herself as having, “an addiction to pain. Getting tattoos is something so beautiful to me because I can fulfill this sick and sad urge that I have through gorgeous art on my body.” While she no longer inflicts harm on herself, getting tattoos allows her to have a therapeutic release where she isn’t inclined to hurt herself. Something that she has done to further aid in her self-expression is dedicating an entire arm to music and art that has inspired her. From having album titles in their original font, album cover designs, portraits, track names, or even symbols from famous paintings covering the entirety of her arm. She mentioned that these are all from artists who have shaped her and allowed her to feel more like herself. Participant C says her tattoos, “have allowed me to be myself, and being queer is a part of that. They have allowed me to feel more accepting of myself and my body.” She doesn’t have tattoos that are explicitly designed to represent her queerness. Rather, she uses symbols and artwork that have inspired her to embrace her identity and be herself—queerness included.

An important topic that was brought up was the level of comfortability that she might experience being in certain tattoo shops. She mentions that being uncomfortable won't hinder her from entering certain spaces, "I have just learned that men will always make me uncomfortable in any situation and that's just something I'm going to have to live with." While she acknowledges that specific environments may make her feel uneasy and unsafe, she doesn't let it stop her from partaking in an art form that brings her joy.

Participant D was the final person that I interviewed for this study. She is 20 years old, is a student, uses she/they pronouns, and she currently has ten tattoos. Although she feels more feminine, she feels as though there is an even balance of feminine and masculine energies. There are moments of hyper-femininity, but on an everyday basis, they feel an even balance. Participant D identifies themselves as queer, as a specific label doesn't accurately define them.

She got her first tattoo at the age of eighteen and proceeded to get eleven more after that in the last two years. She describes tattoos as a way to feel more confident in her body, "I feel like my tattoos really help me embrace my masculine side. I think I feel more comfortable in my skin now that I have tattoos. I am really self-conscious about my arms, so I have all of my tattoos on my arms. It makes me feel a lot more comfortable having my arms showing, knowing that they're covered in art." Tattoos are a beautifying agent for Participant D. By having all ten tattoos be located on her arms, she is working towards self-acceptance for the body she is in.

They recalled a tattoo experience in which they were made to feel incredibly unsafe, "I have gone to other shops in the past where there was no aftercare or any procedures to make me feel safe or relaxed. This shop was fully run by men who I think are a part of the older generation of tattooers. They told me to sit through the pain and didn't allow breaks. I felt so incredibly unsafe and scared. It was my first tattoo in a real shop and it scared me from going to other

places without researching them first.” This experience taught her that not all shops are safe environments for women and queer people. Having not fit the mold of a standard tattoo client, she felt that she was forced to endure the pain of the tattoo, without any comforting bedside manner. Having had this experience, she did more research when going to the next artist, and was able to find a shop that made her feel comfortable.

A specific tattoo that they shared with me was their Medusa tattoo. In the tattoo community, it is common knowledge that having a Medusa tattoo is signifying of a survivor of sexual assault. She explained that having this tattoo was a big factor in helping her heal from such a traumatic event. This piece is definitely a conversation piece for the location and size, but she disclosed that she experiences immense joy when people ask about her tattoos. Because of their hefty price, and the process which it takes to get one, her tattoos are a part of her that she loves talking about.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The findings of this study show a clear idea of how tattoos can assist queer people in their daily lives. As I anticipated, the participants of this study discussed how tattoos are used in their journeys to self-acceptance. All of the participants shared their need to beautify aspects of their bodies. They all mentioned having some sort of body image issues and using tattoos as a tool for self-acceptance. If there was a part of their bodies that was unfavorable to them, they covered that area with the artwork. This action furthered their self-love, and often acted as a form of self-care or therapy for the participant.

In *Visibly Queer: Body Technologies and Sexual Politics*, Pitts discusses the path of LGBTQ+ individuals as they disengage with white heteronormative ideals. Because many body issues and dysmorphia may arise due to the western standard of beauty, it can be deduced that

while acting on self-image issues, and learning how to cope with their dangerous effects, the participants are actively working towards disengaging with western ideals. By covering the parts of their bodies they disagree with and covering them with works of art, the participants admitted to beautifying themselves. While this is a coping strategy for the effects of a harmful societal ideal, they are working towards accepting themselves outside of these ideals and seeing themselves in art.

Knowing that Participant C struggled with self-harm, and understanding that tattooing is an escape from those thoughts, and a tool to end that harm is a huge example of self-care. Although they describe this as being an addiction to pain, tattooing is far less dangerous and doesn't cause long-term suffering. Participant D mentioned that tattooing specific symbols, such as Medusa, allowed her to heal from a traumatic event. Huang discusses in *Scored in Ink: A Narrative of Tattoos as Self-Care, Healing, and Reclamation* the importance of tattoos as a tool for achieving self-help and taking control of something that might plague your past. Both Participant C and Participant D used tattoos as ways to help them cope or heal from something that plagued their past but also resided in their minds. For them, tattooing was something that helped them through and serves as a reminder of how far they have come. While the article focuses more on healing from traumatic events, we can see that this research extends to helping to heal from self-harm as well. Tattoos can create a pipeline from self-harm to self-care, as exhibited in Participant C's statements.

A common theme that was found among all four participants was their shared experience of feeling unsafe or recognizing the unsafe environments of old-school tattoo shops. Participants B, C, and D mentioned feeling unsafe or uncomfortable while being inside these shops. Because they don't fit the ideal client for these shops (masculine and tough men), they felt that they were

either forced to endure an uncomfortable pain with no relief or made to feel like they didn't belong. Participant A shared that the mindsets of these tattoo artists are most likely not going to change. These artists want to tattoo people with shared experiences and values. In the era that these tattoo artists were brought up, it was when the only people getting tattooed were incarcerated, in the military, or gang-affiliated. Tattoos were a symbol of time done. Now, tattoos are a way to express yourself in a beautifully artistic way.

Something that intrigues me about the feeling of being unsafe in a traditional tattoo shop is who it is that is perpetuating this culture of hostility. From the testimonies provided by my participants, it seems that in every situation, it is the much older male tattoo artists, who have ingrained ways of thinking who are perpetrating the uneasiness. Sanders' discussions about locating a tattoo artist are telling of the time in which his work was written. He notes, "most first-time tattoos enter the tattoo setting with little information about the process or even about the relative skill of the artist" (Sanders, 1989, 44). Although we are now able to go on social media, or even the website of the tattoo shop, and see the portfolio of the artist, that was not always the case. Many tattoo artists were working off of flash sheets that were open to any artist in the studio. Although it was the same design, the skill of the artist could drastically alter the final image. This speaks to how much the tattoo community has grown and shifted. Where it used to seem like you were walking in blind, not knowing who your artist was or what design you would be leaving with, you can now see someone's entire portfolio and skillset before you even schedule the appointment. While the tattoo culture is moving in this new direction, the old-school artists still exist and still have a loyal clientele. If you find yourself looking to get a tattoo, there are a variety of different artists you can choose to go to. It is important to recognize that the old-school shops are still running, and are still gaining business. Is it a universal

experience of feeling unsafe in these spaces? Or is it exclusive to those with marginalized identities?

Participant D's statements about feeling forced to sit through the pain of tattoo in the absence of bedside manner are telling of bad tattoo practice. Sanders writes, "But the objectification of the client can increase the potential for conflict and threaten the tattooist's interactional control...Skilled tattooists employ humor, indicate concern, ask clients about aspects of their lives, and provide reassurance to put them at ease. Through the use of these acquired interpersonal skills, the tattooist affirms the client's individuality and further decreases the likelihood of conflict" (Sanders, 1989, 133). Sanders outlines what interpersonal skills are necessary to be exhibited to attract and maintain a client base. Because participant D felt that she was forced to endure the pain, and didn't feel safe due to the lack of bedside manner, she was reluctant to re-enter an old-school studio. I am curious whether the lack of bedside manners is something that reinforces toxic masculine stereotypes of not wanting to be comforted or to comfort another man that is supposedly just as tough as you seem to be. Would old-school artists not want to show this level of weakness, or experience this kind of weakness in their shops?

### **CONCLUSION**

After exploring the question of how tattoos provide individuals within the LGBTQ+ community with a greater sense of self-acceptance and assistance in their self-expression, I have come to three main conclusions. The first is that tattoos can offer a greater therapeutic experience for the individual. Conversations had with all participants showcased how they used their tattoos to accept themselves, as well as cope and heal from situations in their lives. All participants mentioned having struggled with some sort of body image issues. Whether they covered specific body parts that they disliked with a tattoo or used the tattoos to alter the overall image of

themselves, the tattoos were used as tools to beautify something, and further offer a therapeutic experience of self-acceptance.

Another way that the participants used tattoos as a form of self-care was in healing from past traumatic experiences. One participant mentioned how tattoos have allowed her to break the cycle of self-harm, and instead engage in body modifications. By ending the self-inflicted abuse, she was able to turn to the artification of her body and use that as an outlet for her healing. Another participant mentioned how using symbols of empowerment allowed her to heal and cope with a prior sexual assault. The image of Medusa lies on her arm and acts as a reminder of how far she has come and how she is a survivor. She has turned something extremely traumatic into a symbol of strength.

My second finding is based on the culture of tattoo shops. All participants talked about the discomfort they feel entering old-school tattoo shops. One participant even went on to say that it is the men that bring her the most discomfort. Between being forced to sit through a painful tattoo with no aftercare or proper bedside manner, or feeling like this isn't a place where queer people or women belong, the culture of the old-school shops is an intimidating one to enter. While good interpersonal skills and maintaining the comfortability of the client are both great indicators of a good tattoo artist, these are things that many artists lack. One participant, also a working tattoo artist, agreed that these old-school shops are not places where marginalized identities will always be welcome. These can quickly become unsafe environments for those with identities outside of what is considered to be normal. While the culture of tattooing is slow to change, hopeful new artists are emerging. The future of tattooing is in the hands of artists of color, queer artists, and female artists. These are going to be the ones creating safe and comfortable shop environments for people of all walks of life. Although getting a tattoo is

something that can offer someone great feelings of relief, there is much work to be done in the overall tattooing world to ensure a bright future.

The final finding is about how LGBTQ+ individuals use tattoos as modes of self-expression. While one participant mentioned how some of her tattoos are clear representations of her appreciation for the female form, and her interest in women, not all participants shared this experience. The other three participants mentioned that while the tattoos aren't exact representations of their queer identities, tattoos allow them to feel more like themselves and express themselves, and being queer is just a part of that. By allowing people to openly express themselves, there is a space being created where they can openly express their identities, even if the tattoo is not an exact representation of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

By finding the root reasons behind how these four individuals use tattoos, and how they can offer a therapeutic experience, I can add to existing sociological research in a new way. Tattoos are most commonly known as symbols. They don't need to be clear or actual visual representations of the meaning behind the tattoo. By allowing people to have symbolic representations of things they have been through, things that bring them joy, or things that bring about feelings of therapy, self-expression, and self-acceptance are more easily attained. Prior sociological research focused more heavily on the social perception of people with tattoos, or how tattoos can offer modes of self-expression. My research has provided more insight into how queer individuals can use tattoos to express themselves, heal from past traumas, and grow into their true selves.

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