

The Story Behind the Ink¹

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Abstract. The objective of this study is to describe the ways in which tattoos can be seen as *acts of identity* through personal discourse and a form of visual communication within a community of practice. This paper includes descriptive qualitative and quantitative research of people and their relationship with their tattoo(s) and their identity. The data of this study was obtained through a questionnaire broadcast online both in French and in English, for tattoo bearers of all genders. The goal of the survey consisted in discussing the individual story behind each tattoo and its wearer: is the story a matter of agency, identity, gender, social class, ethnicity, personal expression of experiences, emotions, grief, or a mixture of two or more reasons? How can tattoos be regarded as a form of language that shapes the self and identity of individuals?

Keywords: Gender, identity, discourse, tattoos

1. Introduction

This article addresses the notions of identity through the marker of tattoos that we consider as a type of language, a form of discourse and visual communication (Belkin & Sheptak, 2018). Identities are conveyed and shaped by language, which means that linguistic organisation reflects a sense of belonging in its inner structure. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, language has been questioned by theoreticians who see language as reflecting and strengthening hierarchical social orders that oppress minorities and individuals that fall outside the dominant norms. Scholars working on Gender and Language Studies now approach language as *discourse* that either fits or subverts patriarchy (Butler, 2011).

This paper will study the ways in which tattoos are used as a form of expression, and as a way of shaping and creating gendered identities. Tattoos will be also addressed as an alternative discourse, or literacy, that shapes the self and the experiences of individuals in a community (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2007; Kirkland 2009). This paper will then address the link between tattoos, identity, and gender, and how tattoos are a matter of expression, of meaning, and of the self through language, pictorial images, and symbols (McDougall, 2012). For the researchers of this present paper, who are specialised in these particular issues, each tattoo has a *story*. By story, we mean a narrative containing a literal meaning and an inner one: related to identity, personal experiences, expressions and emotions. These stories lead us to our main research question: what is the story behind the ink? We will also introduce and discuss the results and data collected.

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The aim of our research project is to explore the personal stories people tell through their tattoos. The data was collected from a survey which was shared on social media, chiefly *Facebook*, for two weeks, which was followed by semi-directed interviews with three of the participants. Finally, we will discuss how people define and relate themselves in relation to the notions of gender and identity through tattoos.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Self and Identity

Within the Social Sciences, the terms *self* and *identity* are used in various contexts. The importance of self and identity in terms of who I am and what I am – is not only a North American but European concept as well. Generally speaking, identity is used to refer to one's social *face*, especially in terms of negative and positive face– how one perceives how one is perceived by others (Goffman, 1973, 1974). Self is generally used to refer to one's sense of “who I am and what I am” (Belkin & Sheptak 2018, p.1). However, these are not dualistic constructs. The concepts of self and identity indeed evolve out of social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As individuals, we are active participants in our own self/identity construction (Ibid, 1987). The notion of self is important because each individual has a very personal vision of their own self. The self is, therefore, very closely related to the notion of identity, and we notice that individuals do not express their selves in the same way since there is no concrete manner in which to do so.

Expressions of the self, especially self-identity may be conveyed by verbal communication and interaction (McConnell-Ginet, 2007), social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and also visual communication, such as tattoos on the body (Belkin & Sheptak, 2018). The act of tattooing oneself is often undertaken as part of a significant life change or healing process, and it can be seen as the opportunity “to ‘story’ the self” (Woodstock, 2014 p. 782). Tattoos can also be regarded as an intersection between self-identity, the body, and society (Belkin & Sheptak, 2018). As a result, tattoos shape the self and the body of the wearer into a communicative body (Ibid, 2018). Tattoos provide clues about the wearer's self-identity, their perceptions of reality, ideology, and worldviews.

In this study, we establish links between the expression of the self and identity of the tattoos wearer, with a particular focus on gender identities. We explore to what extent gender influences a person's choices when deciding on a tattoo. We will discuss gender in relation to identity in the next section.

2.2. Gender and Identity

Gender Studies question gender representations in society by taking into account the notions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2009, Winter, 2010). In *Sexing the Body* (2000) Fausto- Sterling developed the idea of Mooney and Ehrardt from the school of North American scholars on gender, namely that gender is a psychological, cultural, and constructed concept: masculine vs feminine (Fausto-Sterling, 2000 [1972]). Furthermore, Fausto-Sterling adds that

Mooney and Erhardt discuss that it is necessary to make a distinction between gender roles and gender identity (Fausto-Sterling, 2000 [1972]). The first category, gender roles, describes the behaviour and gender identity of individuals in the public sphere, whereas the second category, gender identity, describes private and personal experience of self:

‘Gender role’ is everything that a person says and does to indicate to others or to the self the degree that one is either male, or female, or ambivalent (Fausto-Sterling, 2000 [1972], p. 257).

Gender identity is as ‘the sameness, unity, and persistence of one’s individuality as male, female, or ambivalent. ... Gender identity is the private experience of gender role, and gender role is the public experience of gender identity’ (Fausto-Sterling, 2000 [1972] p. 4).

Gender identity may also imply the notions of masculinity and femininity. Those notions are analysed as cultural and social constructions of identity. The term gender is considered by many scholars a polysemic term. According to the context, its meaning may vary. Since the 1960s, North American theoretical studies have emphasized the fact that gender is primarily an identity that is produced by a social system: feeling and being a man or a woman in society (Fausto-Sterling, 2000 [1972]). From a sociological perspective gender is also regarded as a system, particularly, a named system that tends to produce norms that would influence gender roles and social behaviours of individuals (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to scholars, specialized in Gender Studies, “norms of heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity are cultural and social constructions” (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

Gender Studies in France address the notion of gender as a patriarchal system that aims to naturalise and trigger hierarchy regarding the differences between men and women (Delphy, 2013). This patriarchal system was created in order to ensure that men could dominate women (for instance, in institutions, laws, legal system, education, and politics) (Ibid, 2013). According to some scholars, such as Butler (1990), Scott and Varikas (1988), and Scott (2009) in North America, or Delphy (2013) in France, gender as a system puts power at stake because it is able to produce or oppress gender identities. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler, and later Dorlin in France (2008), claims that “multiple identities (homosexual, transsexual or intersex etc.) are produced and oppressed because they are seen as subversive and deviant from the standard norms imposed by gender system” (Butler, 2004, p.43-44; Dorlin, 2008, p.109-110). As a result, the gender system discussed above produces very strict and tight binary norms. The latter can be confirmed, reproduced or literally subverted.

We will now consider that tattoos embody a direct visual expression of identity that could be expressed and understood in various ways, for instance, the social or political identity, and so on. We will discuss this point in the next section.

2.3. Tattoos and Identity

In 1769 the term *tattoo* was first used in the writings of Captain Cook to describe the manmade pigment designs in the skin of the indigenous people he encountered around Polynesia (Harper, 2001). Later, during the mid-1880s,

tattoos became popular as a form of linguistic expression in North America and Britain, particularly amongst the upper classes (Czesznek & Stemate, 2019). Swami and Harris explained that during that time “in the wealthy class, the purpose of tattoos was to impress, and in the working class, tattoos were to express” (Fisher, 2002, p. 95; Swami & Harris, 2012, p. 58). During the 1980s, scientists, and in particular sociologists, began to observe the use of tattoos as a form of protest against capitalism and conservatism within the punk and gay community (Czesznek & Stemate, 2019). Therefore, tattoos have long been associated with a person’s identity whether it be their origins, social status, sexuality, or their beliefs.

According to Ruffle and Wilson, there are three types of people in relation to tattoos: non-tattooed people, people with hidden tattoos, and people with visible tattoos (2018), which suggests that having a tattoo is not only a choice, but also a choice of whether to display it or not. Thus, tattoos are part of a person’s physical identity, which can be hidden or shown depending on context and intimacy. This reflects other aspects of identity, such as political or sexual preferences, that the person may decide to reveal if they choose and within certain contexts.

If we accept the premise that tattoos are a visual representation of identity, we must identify what areas of identity are most linked to tattoos. The reasons for getting a tattoo are as varied as the tattoos themselves. They can be to commemorate events or people (Forbes, 2001; Horne et al., 2007) or personal growth and individuality (Atkinson, 2003; Dickson et al., 2015). Some people use tattoos to show and highlight aspects of their identity and personality for others to see (Dickson et al., 2015). Others turn important life experiences into visual affirmations of their individual or collective identity and/or familial loyalty (Woodstock, 2014). However, not all tattoos have a story to tell; many people often cite getting a tattoo because they “just wanted one” or because they “like[d] the looks [sic] of it” (Dickson et al., 2015, p. 108).

According to a study carried out by Czesznek and Stemate, there are eight main reasons for getting a tattoo: “Beliefs and ideologies, aesthetic reasons, strengthening their identity, strengthening social ties, tribute to social models, curiosity, loss of a loved one, emotional support” (2019, p. 64). These themes are often mentioned in other studies about tattoos which explain the reasons why those themes are used certain ways. Atkinson explains that tattoos can be used as a form of affect management whereby the bearers deal with strong emotions such as grief when losing a loved one (2003). Tattoos allow people to respond to emotions in an active, normative, and measured way (Atkinson 2003; Dickson et al., 2015). Tattoos often represent changes that have a significant impact on the bearer’s identity such as the beginning or end of a chapter of someone’s life, or a change of profession, or moving country (Atkinson, 2003; Dickson et al., 2015).

Czesznek and Stemate also explored the various themes of tattoos in the 2000s. They found four main categories of tattoos, as follows: “Symbols that they like, personal identity (family or friends), cultural, religious or ideological themes” (2019, p. 64). In a study of tattoos and tattoo parlours, Woodstock concluded that the narratives of the tattoos themselves are, above all, “intimate tales about overcoming illness, recognizing loss, and celebrating life”, regardless of the bearer’s race, class or gender (2014, p. 783).

Having a tattoo can provide clues about a person's own self-perception of their identity as well as how a person wishes to be perceived by others. There are people who get a tattoo in order to change their image of themselves or to change how they are seen by their peers (Armstrong et al., 2002). Pritchard argues that tattoos are "neither purely one's own nor another's, but rather a kind of split between the individual and the general" (2000, p. 332).

Tattoos are becoming increasingly accepted in society (Sanna, 2016) and in turn more people are getting tattooed, this leads us to believe that more people wish to express themselves and their identity through tattoos. According to a study published in 2010 by Pew Research, 38% of millennials¹ have at least one tattoo and 69% of those have more than one. 32% of generation X is thought to have at least one tattoo (Dimock, 2019). Most tattooed people view tattoos as a means of expression (Forbes, 2001). The choice of tattoo is generally well thought-out and performed whilst sober (Dickson et al., 2015). This reflection proves that tattoos are an integral part of a person's physical identity and rarely the result of impulse and as a result tattoos are linked to the person's idea of their identity and how they wish to turn their identity into a physical and visual demonstration.

In 1996 Gell described tattoos as both the link and the division between the physical body and culture (1996). This means that tattoos can either align a person with the culture they are a part of, such as the Maori tradition, or be a display of rebellion against a more conservative community (Pritchard, 2000). The tattoo bearer will have gone through "the process of *symbolic creativity*" and selected a phrase, image, or marker from the plethora of cultural signs and symbols available to them, and used that "to establish and present their existence, identity and meaning" (Dickson et al., 2015, p. 108).

Moreover, tattoos are often seen as a way of aligning oneself with a group of people or a movement (Kalanj-Mizzi et al., 2019), as was the case in the 1980s punk and homosexual communities (Csesznek & Stemate, 2019). In the same vein, tattoos can be used as both a "marker of individuality or a group identifier" (Kalanj-Mizzi et al., 2019, p. 198). Gang culture notoriously uses graffiti and tattoos to mark its territory and identify its members (Bazan et al., 2002; Piley, 2006). Due to the illegal nature of some marginalised groups and their prominent use of tattoos, tattoos have therefore been associated with this part of subculture (Armstrong et al., 2004).

There are several factors where gender actively influences a tattoo wearer. It has been suggested that men have tattoos as a symbol of group identity more often than women (Horne et al., 2007), whereas women tend to have tattoos for decorative reasons (Forbes, 2001). The location of the tattoo on the body also tends to be influenced by gender. Horne et al. found that women not only have fewer tattoos than men, but also choose parts of the body where the tattoos can be easily hidden (2007). This decision to hide tattoos could be because there is still an element of prejudice towards females with tattoos, which may stem from the sexist belief that tattooed females have violated traditional gender norms

¹ People born between 1965 and 1980 are deemed to be part of Generation X. Those born between 1981 and 1996 are considered to be Millennials, those born between 1997 and 2012 are categorised as being Generation Y (Dimock, 2019)

(Broussard & Harton, 2018; Hawkes et al., 2004). Another study suggested that women have the tendency to get tattoos on or near intimate parts of their body, for example on the lower back or hip, whereas men are more likely to choose *public skin*, such as their arms or legs (Manuel & Sheehan, 2007) this may suggest that women associate tattoos with sexual intimate relations more than men.

We consider that tattoos embody a form of visual language (Belkin et al., 2018) that expresses or provides clues about an individuals' identity (Dickson et al., 2015). We aim to confirm the theories established by our peers and also develop our own theory on language use in tattoos as an expression of linguistic identity. We will discuss how language use relates to identity in the next section.

2.4. Language and Identity

In a globalised world, language hybridity is becoming increasingly common as the boundaries of communities of practice are being broken down by the internet and globalisation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2007). "Language is social" (Denissova et al., 2019, p. 23) and as a consequence, in a globalised world language also crosses borders in the same way that humans do.

The linguistic choices that people make can be seen as "acts of identity" (Jaworski, 2014, p. 138), which can be related to gender, social class, and ethnicity: otherwise known as intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality emerged in Northern America in two key works by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989; 1990). This particular concept tries to explain power and identity relationships between individuals, in regard to social class, gender, race, language (Block & Corona, 2016). It also acknowledges that when studying identity everything must be taken into consideration, that is to say, gender cannot be isolated and studied alone. Race, social class, education etc. must also be acknowledged as significant factors in defining a person's identity. According to Bucholtz and Hall, identity is produced by language and linguistic interaction, where identity is "the social positioning of self and other" (2005, p. 586). This could be explained in terms of individual awareness: to either distance oneself from others by demonstrating uniqueness or to develop social bonds and affiliations with groups as part of social identity (Yakushkina & Olson, 2017).

Other researchers, such as Johnstone, have found that identity, and with it a sense of self, is generally conveyed to the social world through a form of discourse (1996). Given that discourse is a form of language, and it has been argued that discourse is a series of acts of identity occurring through language (LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), it can be reasoned that language is therefore an act of identity. However, the relationship between language and identity is not a causal relationship but rather a reciprocal one. Language is the medium for the transmission of both culture and values as well as influencing identity (Yakushkina & Olson, 2017). As a consequence, script tattoos, tattoos containing words or letters, are visual examples of discourse and ultimately acts of identity that also imply language choice.

2.4.1. *Language Choice*

When people learn or speak a second or third language they face a linguistic choice each time they wish to communicate. Language choice is generally determined by the target audience, but in the case of tattoos and other forms of artistic expression it is more closely linked to the individual and their language identity.

Language choice has been referred to as “secondary culture identity”, and is described as the skills needed in order to communicate in a multi-cultural setting (Denissova et al., 2019, p. 22) where identity is influenced by language choice as well as language use (Yakushkina & Olson, 2017). Due to the intertwined nature of culture and language learning, it is impossible to learn one without the other, and knowledge of a new culture ultimately shapes and develops an individual’s identity (Denissova et al., 2019). Besnier concludes that using English, as a second or other language, in discourse or written form, establishes the language user as cosmopolitan and modern (2003).

Language choice is personal and fundamental to that individual’s identity. It is entwined with all other aspects of their identity and is proof of their position in the linguistic world. Script tattoos are, therefore, examples that highlight or reveal an individual’s position in the linguistic world, their relationship to their identity by making precise language choices for their tattoos. We will now explore script tattoos in the next section.

2.4.2. *Script Tattoos*

The researchers have discovered that there is a gap in the literature and research surrounding tattoos in different languages. The researchers therefore view tattoos as examples of text art and as a literacy practice. Text can be defined either “spoken or written languages” (Fairclough 2013, p. 3). Texts are used to represent reality, facilitate social interactions and form new identities (Halliday, 1978). Text art is where the “language is the image, or a dominant element of the visual field.” (Jaworski 2014, p. 140).

Image-text relations – and their investigation within a broad range of disciplines from literature and philosophy to art history and geography – have a rich and varied tradition. (Gross 2010, p. 277)

Tattoos are one such example of pictures and letters being combined into text art, and therefore even script tattoos alone can be considered as art. Body art and tattoos are a means to express a person’s identity and some scholars believe that even non-script tattoos also be considered “active expressions of linguistic command” (Mollegaard, 2016, p. 349). It has been stated that such hybrid formations of language and art are examples of “art infused with language,” whereby the language is “both verbally intelligible and purely visible matter” (Oramas & Ferrari, 2009, p. 13). Magro and Martinez-Avila argue that not every language choice is necessarily an act of identity, however, when considering script tattoos language choice is always an act of identity due to the language being permanently marked on the bearer’s skin (2018).

Kirkland argues that tattoos are an alternative literacy practice and that tattoos are literacy artifacts (2009). Pictorial or script tattoos tell the story of a

person's life. When the bearer decides to use a specific language for their tattoo, they are making a decision about their identity and how they wish to be perceived by others. The bearers choose a language in order to place themselves within a specific social landscape through their use of tattoos as a linguistic practice (Eckert, 2012).

Language choice when communicating is generally decided for the target audience, when it is for use in a tattoo it is chosen for the wearer. When a tattoo wearer makes a choice about their script tattoo, they make a choice about how they identify with language and languages themselves and so, they also choose, in a sense, how to display their linguistic identity (Denissova et al., 2019). We, furthermore, question if the gender parameter may have an influence on the language choices tattoo bearers make when deciding and designing script tattoos. We will now discuss how gender impacts discourse.

2.5. Gender and Discourse: The Impact of Gender on Discourse

The distinction between men's and women's language is a symptom of a problem in our culture, not the problem itself. It reflects the fact that men and women are expected to have different interests and different roles, to hold different types of conversations, and to react differently to other people (Tolmach-Lakoff, 2004 [1975], p. 62).

Since 1975, North American linguists Tolmach-Lakoff and later Tannen (1991) have questioned the weight, even the burden, of conversational styles of men and women. Are conversational styles real choices, or assigned ones? Social pressures compel individuals to abide by the rules of masculinity or femininity (Winter, 2010, Dolan, 2010, 2014). Gender shows up, speaks up, and plays up in both verbal communication, interaction, and gestures. The linguist and anthropologist Birdwhistell in 1970 and later Goffman (1974) and Tannen (1994) remind us of the notions of gender display and recognition and gender-identifying behaviour (Birdwhistell, 1970; Goffman, 1974, Tannen, 1994). As a consequence, gendered conversational styles belong to social behaviour that performs and validates assigned gendered norms. Gender is therefore a regulative factor for social norms. In other words, men and women conform to appropriate styles in their interactions so as to guarantee their social value:

There is an increasing body of evidence that (...) age, grade, status, courtship, territoriality, play, mood, states of health and of alarm or well-being are completely and intricately patterned and learned. To be viable members of their social groupings, fish, birds, mammals, and man must engage in significant symbolization – must learn to recognize, receive, and send ordered messages. In other words, the individual must learn to behave in appropriate ways which permit the other members of the group to recognize and anticipate his behavior. Society is that way in which behavior is calibrated so that existence is not a process of continuous and wasteful trial and error. (Birdwhistell 1970, p. 74)

In some institutions, a man or a woman who refuses to conform to gender and assigned norms runs the risk of facing social sanctions or even isolation. Being anti-conformist, through gestures, language, clothes, or aesthetics could result in mockery and/or even loathing from peers. Men and women are therefore faced with the existential challenges of being themselves or abiding by societies' rules

and norms. All these social constraints have been summed up by Tolmach-Lakoff in 1975 by the very famous quotation: “Damned if you do; damned if you don’t” (1975, p. 39)

The existence of constraints in language is not surprising since language is a *social fact*, par excellence (Saussure, 1999). Language is therefore part of located inscriptions, collective regulations of semiological and behavioural codes. In this vein, in 1994, the North American linguist Tannen produced theoretical work *Gender and Conversational Interaction* in which she claims:

The “cultural” and “social” approach to gender and language usually refers to the proposal by Maltz and Borker that males and females can be thought of as belonging to two cultural groups since they tend to socialize in primarily sex-separate peer interaction during childhood. Another aspect of cultural patterning that bears on gender and language is the recognition that gender is only one of many cultural influences affecting linguistic and social behaviours (Tannen, 1994, p. 5)

Tannen’s theoretical framework on the impact of gender discourse has been largely influenced by Tolmach-Lakoff (1975) and recently and accurately theorized by North American linguists such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet. In *Language & Gender* (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2007), both argue that gender plays a structural role in verbal and non-verbal interaction. According to them, gender is in the background of our discourse. Gender is implied, implicit, and belongs to shared assumptions upon which every form of communication relies, including tattoos (Ibid, 2007). According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, many interactional practices exist (2007). As a result, “gender identity” construction is a dynamic process which draws itself in interaction on a daily basis” (Ibid, p. 59). Interestingly enough, according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s perspective, enacting speech is only possible thanks to an individual (2007), who always has an objective in mind (*saying, convincing, sharing*). Furthermore, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet conclude that “style or discourse is not a façade behind which the *real* self stands but the means by which we present ourselves or ourselves-in-making to the world” (2007, p.248). In other words, stylistic practice is at the crux of performativity. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet both consider that language, discourse and society are inseparable (2007). As a result, gender, discourse and interaction all belong to a pragmatic approach of language. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet claim that a “pragmatics approach sheds light on practice meaning, and usages” (2007, p. 43). For instance, Tolmach-Lakoff sees language and any form of discourse as meaning making:

Making meaning is a defining activity of Homo Sapiens, and that it is more than just a cognitive exercise, since those who get to superimpose a meaning on events control the future of their society. And since so much of our cognitive capacity is achieved via language, control of language—the determination of what words mean, who can use what forms of language to what effects in which settings—is power. Hence the struggles I am discussing (...) are not tussles over “mere words,” or “just semantics”—they are battles over the ability to define, and thus create, a large part of our reality (Tolmach-Lakoff, 2000, p. 42).

Gendered discursive practices are part of the *communities of practice* (Eckert, McConnell-Ginet, 2006 [2003]). The concept of Communities of Practice was,

introduced by Wenger and Lave in 1991. Communities of Practice initially referred to educational and professional contexts. Nevertheless, the concept was also extended to groups of people tied by their discursive performances of gender, for example

The notion of community of practice takes us away from a community defined by a location or a population. It is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. [...] Gender is produced (and often reproduced) in differential memberships in communities of practices [...] The symbolic value of linguistic form is taken as given but [...] in actual practice, in social meaning, social identity, community memberships, forms of participation, the full range of community practices and the symbolic values of linguistic form are being constantly and mutually constructed. (Eckert, McConnell-Ginet, 2006 [2003], p.200-202)

The central themes that are at stake here are community and bounding (Tannen, 2001 [1991]). In other words, belonging to a community who are bound together because of common language practices. This idea is particularly accurate when referring to tattoos as a common (linguistic) practice. We consider, therefore, that tattoos are a linguistic and an expressive practice which focuses on the concepts of community and bounding (Ibid, 2001 [1991]) within a bounded community. Indeed, tattoos can be seen as symbolic expression shared by various individuals belonging to the same society or culture. Tattoos become therefore a linguistic, discursive, and expressive practice that gathers people around common aesthetic preferences and hence has the power to favour bounding, interaction and even become a marker that shapes identity within a community. The symbolic nature of tattoos also lends itself to tattoos being seen as identity markers, a common linguistic practice that allows the bearers to interact with others through their culturally established aesthetic preferences (Bell, 1999; Dickson et al., 2015). We will explore that particular point in the next section.

2.6. Tattoos as a Linguistic Practice

Tattoos are much more than just decorative art forms, they are also seen as a vehicle for expression (Velliquette et al., 1998). When people have a tattoo, it is because they have a message that they wish to convey permanently on their body using an image or language. Tattoos can be defined as visual language (Belkin & Sephtak, 2018), or visual discourse that tends to influence the indexation of identity in society. According to McDougall, “the function of a language is to convey the meaning; even more than that, it should convey the inner thoughts and feelings of the individual person” (2012, p. 328), consequently a script tattoo is the wish to permanently display an inner thought or feeling through language. These inner thoughts of feelings being a crucial part of an individual’s identity.

Bearers choose tattoos which are symbols that are meaningful in their social and cultural worlds (Atkinson, 2003; Dickson et al., 2015). Tattoos fulfil both the basic role of body decoration: a “surface [...] filled with hieroglyphs telling one of the stories of corporeality in history” (Falk, 1995, p. 95) and also allow people who go through ineffable experiences to express themselves using the linguistic and practical tools available, in this case, tattoos (Armstrong et al., 2002; Greif et al., 1999; Sanna, 2016).

More recently people have been getting literary tattoos, also known as: “book tattoos”, “bookish tattoos”, “lit tat”, or “lit ink” (Chassagnol, 2018). This type of tattoo can be part of script tattoos when it contains words or letters, or part of pictorial tattoos when it is just images. This trend has not gone unnoticed; in 2007, *Contrariwise: Literary Tattoos* became one of the first online blogs to observe this phenomenon by inviting photographic contributions from literary tattoo-bearers (Chassagnol, 2018). This was swiftly followed by the first anthology entitled “*The Word Made Flesh: Literary Tattoos from Bookworms Worldwide*” which brought together the inked and the writers, including the quotes and poems featured in tattoos (Chassagnol, 2018). This trend suggests that the interest in script tattoos is growing as an increasing number of people have a tattoo linked to literature, and also people’s relationship with language and literature is evolving as people wish to ink themselves with their favourite poem or quote instead of just having the book on the shelf. As a result, we also notice that individual’s tastes or emotions conveyed by tattoos, and the tattoos themselves, are part of an identification process and therefore part of the person’s identity.

Besides the issue of tattoos as a linguistic practice and the individual’s creative process, we wonder if tattoos cannot be also related to the notion of community of practice (Eckert, McConnel-Ginet, 2007). That is to say a common language, a common (linguistic) practice that enables individuals to identify with within a community, namely the community of tattoo bearers.

2.7. Communities of Practice

Human beings have the ability to communicate and interact with one another through signs, symbols, and language (Denissova et al., 2019). According to the Australian linguist and feminist Spender in *Man Made Language*, language is a not a simple code for of expression, Spender wrote: “One of the crucial factors in our construction of this reality is language. Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality” (Spender, 1980: 2). Furthermore, language, is also, in syntactic, grammarian, verbal and interactional forms, a very powerful tool in representation, which Delbecque called in French “*un outil d'idéation*” a creative thinking tool (2002 p.1) that could shape and influence our thoughts and behaviour in a negative way regarding *sex* and *gender* (Sunderland, 2006).

After having introduced and discussed our theoretical framework, we will now introduce the methodology which led the empirical study, namely the research questions, the data collection, the results, and the general discussion.

3. Research Questions

After presenting the current literature, the paper now introduces the data collection and analysis. Whilst exploring the relationship between tattoos, gender, and identity several key questions arose:

- i. In what ways are tattoos a matter of agency, identity, gender, personal expression of experiences, emotions, and or grief?
- ii. Are tattoos a means of expression?

- iii. How can tattoos be regarded as a linguistic practice?
- iv. What can be inferred about the relationship between tattoos, gender, and identity?

4. Methodology

The present study is based on an anonymous questionnaire that was broadcast online, both in French and in English via social networks including *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*. *Facebook* was particularly useful due to its groups and pages which connect users who are not friends but who share a common interest. The questionnaire can be found in the appendices.

The study aims to describe the link between gender and identity expressed through the visual form of communication embodied by tattoos. The survey had two main angles and purposes: what category of tattoo does the participant have (script or image), and how does the participant see themselves and their tattoo?

The data collected from participants were survey answers, including a precise description of their tattoo, the language used in the tattoo, the different meanings given by the participants for their choice of tattoo, and how the wearers saw their tattoos in relation to their identity. The 119 tattooed participants were a mixture of ages, genders, who spoke predominantly English or French as a first language.

The participants completed the survey and were asked if they would be available for an interview, those who were willing were invited to leave an email address. The researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with three participants. The researchers carried out the interviews either via telephone, video conferencing, or face-to-face. All of the participants mentioned have been assigned pseudonyms.

5. Results

Tattoos are a form of personal, permanent expression chosen, or designed, by the wearer. The following results refer to a survey of people with tattoos. The survey was published on various social media sites (*Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*) for two weeks. 135 participants responded to the survey in either French or English. 16 respondents did not have a tattoo and were not included in the study¹. The gender distribution of respondents was as follows: 83 female participants, 33 male participants, 2 participants who identified with neither gender and 1 who identified with both genders. The respondents were between 20 and 60 years old. As shown in Figure 1 the modal age group was 26-30 years of age.

¹ These participants were asked if they had a tattoo, if they replied in the negative their questionnaire came to an end. Perceptions of other people's tattoos were not an aspect of this present study.

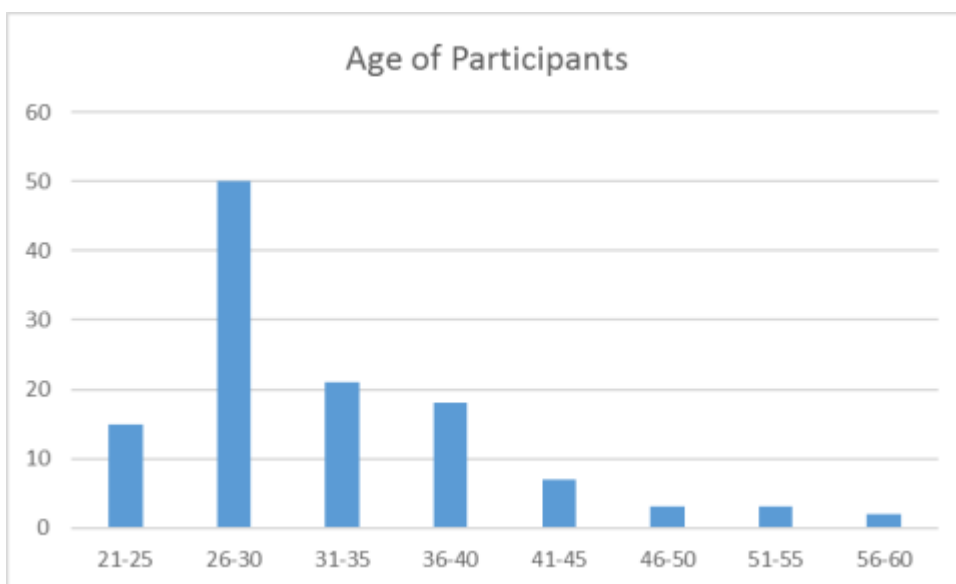


Figure 1 - Age of participants

The participants were also asked about the languages that they speak. Twenty-nine languages were cited. The most cited languages were: English (93 citations), French (41 citations), and Spanish (22 citations). The most common first language was also English (66 citations) followed by French (17 citations) and Spanish (4 citations).

Most of the participants (30%) had one tattoo. The 119 respondents with a tattoo were asked to describe their type of tattoos. Most of the respondents (72%) described (one of) their tattoo(s) as being only symbols, drawings or images, and 26% had a tattoo containing words or letters. Three people had tattoos that they categorised as “other”. One person had been tattooed around their eyelids as a form of permanent make up (Female 51-55 years old), and another, a tattoo artist, described his tattoos as “abstraction” (Male participant 31-35 years old). The tattoo artist stated in the questionnaire that he is immersed in the world of tattoos and therefore the tattoos could have become abstract parts of his identity.

5.1. Tattoos and Language Choice

Participants with a tattoo containing words or letters were asked what language their tattoo was in and why they had chosen that language. Thirty-four respondents said that they had one or more tattoos in the form of words or letters. The participants cited fifteen languages including English (21 citations), Chinese, (7 citations), Portuguese, Japanese, Latin and French (2 citations respectively) and music “the international language” (Female 26-30 years old). The reasons for choosing a specific language varied. Language choice was often linked to the

person's experience (origins or travels¹) or an aesthetic preference. On the other hand, one participant explained that their tattoo artist refused to write in French and therefore their tattoo was in Chinese:

Chinois parce que mon tatouer ne voulait pas me l'écrire en français ! (Male 26-30 years old)

Chinese because my tattoo artist didn't want to write in French!²

They nevertheless agreed to have a tattoo in the language of their tattoo artist's choice, showing the importance and influence a tattoo artist may have over his/her tattooee.

Of the participants who had a language tattoo, seven explained that their tattoo was written in their L1 (first language), two said that their language tattoo referred to where they lived or had lived, and two participants said that it was because they were a language teacher. As described in the literature review, this result shows that language tattoos are strongly linked to personal identity. This could be relating to their childhood, their first language, a place they have lived or live, or a part of their career that they believe to be important enough to be permanently displayed on their skin.



Photograph 1 - Participant's name in Arabic (Male 30-35 years old)

The participant that bears that tattoo in photograph one wrote:

"I am a language teacher although not of the ones mentioned. Languages represent certain aspects of myself. I love languages, always will! Awaiting one [tattoo] to be done in Latin". (Male 31-35 years old)

5.2. Tattoos and Identity

Steve, the tattoo artist we interviewed, gave the following reasons for people choosing to have a tattoo: "It's something that [is] such a personal reason and there's so many different ways to be tattooed." Steve explained that tattoos were often linked with the beginnings and endings of chapters in people's lives. Nevertheless, he gave two main reasons for people choosing to have a tattoo:

¹ The earliest form of travel tattoo is the Pilgrimage tattoo. These tattoos commemorate having journeyed to a holy site. Christian pilgrim tattoos can be traced back to the 1500s (Sanna, 2016).

² Translation provided by the authors.

A lot of people get tattooed for highly personal individual reasons or you can get a bro[brotherhood] tat¹ or a gang tat [...] you'll see that a lot, that people will get that tattoo, like a certain tattoo with their friends [...] and] more of my clients [for group tattoos] are women than men. (Steve, Tattoo Artist)

We have categorised these choices as being representative of both personal identity and group membership. The tattoo artist's testimony was supported by the following data we collected, that of the tattoo bearers.

In keeping with the diversity of tattoo themes collected by Czesznek and Stemate (2019), we found several themes related to the stories the participants gave for their choice of tattoo (see table 1 for a list of stories provided by the participants):

Story	Citations
Family	38
Loss of a loved one	19
Symbol or object that the participant loves	21
Design that the participant found aesthetically pleasing	14
Group or pair tattoo	12
Travel	12
Hardship or obstacles	11
Religion/ Spirituality	8
No Story	8

Table 1 - Story behind the tattoo

Our research confirmed four of the reasons for being tattooed cited by Czesznek and Stemate (2019) (beliefs, aesthetics, social ties, and loss of a loved one) yet, the data highlighted other previously unexplored themes including: a loved object or symbol, travel, and hardship. Czesznek and Stemate's results suggested that tributes to social models, curiosity, and emotional support all feature highly as reasons for having a tattoo (2019). However, our research suggested that social models are not a major feature of tattoos within our focus group and that few people decide to have a tattoo out of curiosity². The research also suggested that the themes seen in tattoos can come in and out of fashion, religion and beliefs being the first reason in our study cited by Czesznek and Stemate (2019) whereas religion was the eighth most cited reason. These fluctuations represent the change of importance that people place on themes over time. Therefore, tattoos are a way of identifying contemporary social markers of identity. It must be noted that there

¹ Tat= abbreviation for tattoo

² 3 Male participants cited curiosity as the reason for their tattoo.

were 38 separate (identity) stories cited for having a tattoo, which is testimony to the richness of stories behind the ink.

5.3. Tattoos and Sense of Membership

One form of group membership is family membership, and the most cited story for a tattoo was *family* (38 citations). Tattoos for family as a global category could be broken down into tattoos dedicated to parents, children, or siblings. The ways in which family was represented was individual to each tattoo bearer: for example, there were people who had the name of their child or their birthdate. Others had the initials of a family member, an object or animal to symbolise their family, or the family motto.

Godmother and grandmother passed away so I have godmother's name and a quote for my grandmother. Stars representing my family and a quote to remind me that no one is perfect (Female 31-35)

One such participant had two tattoos on her legs to represent her parents through their jobs. She had a paintbrush tattoo for her father who is a painter and scissors for her mother who is a hairdresser. She also had the phrase "never forget your freedom" next to a swallow tattooed on her ribcage which is the advice her mother installed in her from a young age.



Photograph 2 - Paintbrush and scissors to represent the tattoo bearer's parents (Female 21-25 years old).

In another example featuring family ties, a male participant cited the variety of his tattoos, including personal interest and family. This shows that the bearers are not bound to one type of tattoo, they have a tattoo for each element of their identity and self that they wish to embody on their skin.

I have a range of different tattoos. From my son's name to a portrait of Darth Vader. I have tattoos for my wife, son, grandparents, and parents. Others are quite meaningless. I have one that means never give up. (Male 26-30 years old)

One person explained that their tattoo was a heart on their palm, which geographically represented the place she spent her holidays growing up in

Michigan¹. The participant explained that the message linked to this tattoo was “Home is where the heart is” (Female 21-25 years old).

Tattoos, as discussed in the literature review, are not only a way of showing uniqueness, but also a way of creating bonds with other people. Six of the respondents mentioned having an identical tattoo to someone else or to a group of people. The reason for collective tattoos is varied and could be for example, grief, a group holiday, or a wish to be a member of a community.

One participant explained that he and his cousin were curious to see what being tattooed felt like and decided to have vertical lines drawn on their shins at a party by a friend who was a tattoo artist. The cousins claimed that the vertical lines had no particular significance, apart from perhaps representing the fact that they shared them. Their female cousin has since decided to have the same tattoo to match them, emphasizing the motivation for strengthening a sense of family community through tattoo bearing.



Photograph 3 - The same tattoo shared by two cousins (Male 26-30 years old)

As in this example, most participants did not provide as specific reason for communal tattoos:

[I have a] Lamborghini outline that 9-other people in my friendship group have
(Male 31-35 years old)

Le Batman est un tatouage commun avec mon frère (Female 31-35 years old)

The Batman is a tattoo I have in common with my brother.

One participant explained that one of her tattoos was symbolic of her desire to belong and be included within the French community, see photograph 4. The tattoo in question was the French national flower: the iris. The tattoo represented both French culture and language. Her other tattoo was a sorority symbol, implying that the wearer belonged to an association or group that was represented

¹ Michigan is shaped like a glove and so the hand naturally reflects its shape.

by the tattoo, in this case, an anchor and therefore the association may be nautical.



Photograph 4 - Tattoo representing desire to belong and be a part of a group (Female 21-25 years old)

5.4. Tattoos and Grief

Twelve of the participants explained that they had tattoos because of a loved one that had passed away. The ways in which people documented their grief varied. This reflects the fact that grief is a very personal and individual emotion that everyone manages differently. Thus, any expression of this grief through a tattoo would be equally as personal. Grief is both an individual and often shared experience, for example, one tattoo bearer had the same tattoo as her brother to document the loss of their younger brother, see photograph 5. The act of sharing a tattoo brought the siblings closer together and allowed them to carry a physical reminder of their younger brother with them:

“I never thought I would get a tattoo as I don’t actually like them and I don’t think they suit my personality and style. But I think my tattoo represents me and my new identity. I feel like it is a stamp of grief, a permanent symbol of the pain I will have to carry with me for the rest of my life...” (Female 36-40 years old)



Photograph 5 - Marking the grief of losing a brother (Female 36-40 years old)

Another participant explained that having a permanent tattoo was a way of symbolising a loved one's presence "[who] can't be removed from [the wearer] ever again" (Female 21-25 years old). Therefore, tattoos can not only be a link to other people who are grieving, but also a way of connecting the wearer to the person who has passed away.



Photograph 6 - Expressing the grief of losing a partner (Female 31-35 years old)

The tattoo in photograph 6 was designed by its wearer, Amy, after the sudden death of her partner. It represents her, her partner, and their pet. Amy explained that the process of being tattooed was similar to having a mid-life crisis and having a makeover, it was necessary for her personal grieving process:

I lost my partner Alexander suddenly due to cancer and so I had a mini mid-life crisis, I dyed my hair and got tattoo of my cat. The bear is me, his pet name for me, then there's my cat, and the star is Alexander watching over us. (Amy, Female 31-35 years old)

5.5. Tattoos and Hardship

Six participants cited obstacles, hardships or challenges that they had faced as being the stories for their tattoos. One of the respondents with “Sink or Swim” inscribed on his arm was to remind him to “keep moving no matter how tough things get” (Male 26-30 years old). He was tattooed just before moving to a country he had never been to before and this was a challenge for him. He felt that the tattoo served as a reminder not to give up.

In addition, another respondent had a star to represent fishermen and “finding your way home” which she chose after going through a difficult time and so the tattoo symbolises her ability to cope. Another tattoo bearer also referenced the struggle against hardship as the reason for his “typical seaman’s tattoo: Swedish flag, eagle, sinking ship and a rose”. He also had a script tattoo which read ‘Last Port’ and the message of the tattoo was “to try until the bitter end” (Male 56-60 years old).

One female participant (26-30 years old) had multiple tattoos representing different areas of her life: her faith, experiences, and hardships. She had “warrior” tattooed on her side as a symbol of her strength and perseverance.

[Tattoos] are representations of my faith and life experiences. They represent obstacles I’ve overcome as a way through my healing journey. Yes [they represent me] 100%. They have a message to me that I can do this ugly messy life and I’m strong and able. (Female 26-30 years old)



Photograph 7 - Tattoo representing personal strength (Female 26-30 years old)

5.6. Tattoos and Gender identity

Overall, the participants in our study did not explicitly say that their tattoos were linked to their gender, masculinity, femininity, or sexuality. When considering our results, we noticed that male tattoo bearers did not reference their

masculinity or virility when replying to the survey explaining their tattoos. However, evidence of gender themes can be found in some of the tattoos and their stories. Four females, one male, and one non-binary tattoo bearer cited emotion, femininity, sexuality, or feminism as the story for their tattoo. When one of the participants was interviewed the researcher discovered that the hardships he had referenced in the survey referred to his sexuality and coming out.

One female participant (26-30 years old) had a feminist slogan on her wrist to mark the 100-year anniversary of women getting the vote. This historic landmark was particularly important for the participant as her great grandmother was a suffragette. Another female respondent (36-40 years old) had a feminist political quote “Nevertheless she persisted” tattooed on her neck and therefore it could be said that her gender identity was related to her political identity. One female participant (21-25 years old) had the phrase “cry baby” tattooed on her thigh to represent her “sensitivity”. Another, female participant (26-30 years old) had a moon tattoo which she said represented “femininity and emotions”.

One participant’s tattoo overtly represented their gender and identity. Nat (26-30 years old identifies with both genders) had a tattoo featuring the words “WAKE UP” tattooed on their thigh. This tattoo combines several of Nat’s identities:

- i. Wake up is used in the political sense to be “woke”¹
- ii. Each letter is a different colour of the rainbow as they are part of the LGBTQ+ community
- iii. One of their passions is *wakeboarding*
- iv. Nat reported a life motivation to be uplifted as they described in French as “aller là haut” (to go/be *up* there)



Photograph 8 - Tattoo symbolising the bearer’s multiple identities (Participant 26-30 years old).

¹ “Woke” originates from African American Vernacular English. It refers to a person being socially aware. Its use has become increasingly popular since 2014 becoming entwined with the Black Lives Matter movement.

During the interview, Nat said that they had been involved in different political movements during their youth, including the LGBTQ+ community. Nat reported having many passions and each of their many tattoos represented a different part of their identity. For example, they had a tooth because they were a dentist and a tattoo for each of the places they had lived. Nat's activism linked with their gender identity was one of the reasons why they, unlike others, had a tattoo openly linked to their gender.

One male respondent, Leo, explained that his tattoo represented the present breaking away from the past. The use of the deer was to symbolize both nature and being reborn. As Leo designed and drew his own tattoo, each element was linked to his personal struggle and growth. Leo explained that he had suffered from depression and anxiety in the past. He had had a hard time accepting his sexuality as he came from "a very strict homophobic Catholic family".

"I kept asking myself if I was making a mistake, although I wasn't making anything, just being." (Male 26-30 years old)

His tattoo represented him moving on from his struggle to accept his sexuality and himself and learning to make something out of his past into something positive for his future.



Photograph 9 - Tattoo symbolising sexuality, hardship, and anxiety (Male 26-30 years old).

5.7. Tattoos and Aesthetics

Almost all of the tattoo bearers chose an object or symbol that they found aesthetically pleasing, but this was not often the only reason. Tattoos tend to be referred to as addictive (Murray & Tompkins, 2013), this *addiction* has turned into tattoo-mania (Sosin, 2014) and so finding an image that is pleasing to look at is sometimes reason enough because people who like to have tattoos often want more:

Not all of them do have a story behind. Some of them are just beautiful to look at, others are symbolic for deaths and other moments I have a special relation to (Male 31-35 years old)

Pas vraiment. Je ne pense qu'à moi lorsque je me fais tatouer. Il ne s'agit pas de chercher à revendiquer une appartenance à un groupe. Je trouve cela beau e quand j'y pense tout le temps, je le fais (Female 26- 30 years old)

Translation: Not really. I only think about myself when I get tattooed. It's not about trying to claim membership of a group. I think it's beautiful and when I think about it all of the time, I do it.



Photograph 10 - female participant's first tattoo (scorpion in the hat) and a woman's face due to her love of the sailor jerry style (41-45 years old)

Another participant explained that he had always appreciated and liked tattoos. He saw them as aesthetically pleasing and a permanent reminder of his memories and life experiences:

I've known I've wanted tattoos since I first saw one. The permanence of it is like a snapshot of your life from when you got it. Besides that, they can be beautiful and is a unique way of adorn your skin (Male 31-35)

6. Conclusion

The survey shows that tattoo bearers express themselves through script or pictorial tattoos. The participants explained their tattoos in relation to their identities. These identities could relate to life events, such as births, and deaths, or to relationships with others. Tattoos could also represent personal or community hardships such as the loss of a loved one, or social hardship.

The data of the survey revealed that no clear relationship between gender and choice of tattoo can be made. The stories behind the ink revealed stories about identity above all. Consequently, Tannen's hypothesis (1991, 1994) that communication and some language choice are gendered were not revealed in our study.

Our study tended to show that all the participants, however they identified, conveyed general personal emotions such as happiness, sadness, and grief through their tattoos. The expression of personal emotions through tattoo bearing

was not shown to be linked to a matter of gender, or a question of masculinity or femininity, but rather a matter of humanity (Winter, 2010; Dolan, 2010, 2014). Tattoos are therefore a form of discourse through which people present their multiple identities rather than first and foremost their gender identity (McDougall, 2012). Particular meaning is not centred around only one or various gender identities but rather around the ideals, experiences and values claimed by an individual person.

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8. Appendices

8.2. Questionnaire

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have a tattoo? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If yes how many? • What tattoo content do you have? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Symbols ○ Language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What languages do you know? • Is there a story behind your tattoo? If so, what is it? • Would you be available for an interview? • What age are you? • What gender do you associate with? • What languages do you speak in order of proficiency? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avez-vous un tatouage ? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Si oui, combien ? • Comment décririez-vous vos tatouages ? • Sont-ils écrits dans une langue précise ? Si oui, laquelle et pourquoi ? • Décrivez vos tatouages • Votre tatouage a-t-il une histoire particulière ? Si oui, laquelle ? • Est-ce que <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Vos tatouages représentent-ils des symboles? ○ Sont-ils écrits dans une langue précise? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Si oui, laquelle ? • Votre tatouage a-t-il une histoire particulière? • Si oui, laquelle ? • Seriez-vous d'accord pour vous entretenir avec nous à ce propos ?
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quel âge avez-vous ? • Etes-vous un homme ou une femme ? • Quelle est votre langue maternelle ? Parlez-vous d'autres langues ?
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8.2. Questionnaire Full Results

Feature	Frequency		
Men	31		
Women	83		
Prefer not to say	15		
Other	6		
Number of tattoos	440		
Tattoos with symbols	107		
Languages	Citations		
English	21		
Chinese	7		
French	2		
Japanese	2		
Portuguese	2		
Swedish	1		
Arab	1		
Egypt	1		
Greek	1		
Korean	1		
Mandarin	1		
Spanish	1		
Thai	1		
Stories behind the Tattoos Citations			
Story	Citations		
	Male	Female	Other
Family	5	33	-
Grief	2	17	-
Something the bearer loves	7	14	-
Aesthetically pleasing	4	10	-
Travel	3	9	-
Group/ Pair tattoo	2	10	-
Hardship/ Challenges/ Obstacles	2	9	-
Religion/ Spirituality	4	4	-
No story	3	5	-
Job	4	2	-
Origins	3	3	-
Impulse	1	5	-
Memories	-	5	-
Life experiences	1	3	-
Gender	-	4	1
Gift	2	2	-
Love / Partner	1	3	-

Curiosity	3	-	-
Rebellion	-	3	-
Friend	-	3	-
End of relationship	-	3	1
Positivity	1	2	-
Linked to the self	1	2	-
Mistake	-	2	-
Astrology	1	1	-
Strength	-	2	-
Scar cover	-	2	-