

Inked Identity: How Tattoos Play a Role in the Development and Perception of Identity, Self, and
the Body for Trans Men

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ABSTRACT

Although much research has been conducted on the embodied experience of tattoos across cultures and subcultures (DeMello 1995; Rubin 1988; Sullivan 2009; Dickson et al. 2015; Ferreira 2014; Roberts; 2012; Johnson 2006; Klesse 2007; Kosut 2008, 2013; Schildkrout 2004), there is presently no research which focuses directly on female-to-male (FTM) trans individuals with tattoos, and how these tattoos help shape their body image, masculinity, and identities. Therefore, the question this research aims to answer is: what role do tattoos play in the development and perception of masculinity, identity, and the self, for transgender men? Using a thematic analysis method, six themes were extracted from the ten participants interviewed. These themes demonstrate the multiple roles tattoos play in the lives of these trans men. The most significant theme discovered through these interviews was how tattoos are related to one's trans identity. For some participants, this relation was direct, where individuals got tattoos connected to their trans identity, such as the trans symbol, or the date they started hormone replacement therapy. Yet for others, the connection was indirect, where many participants related tattoos they had before they realized they were trans, and now, can see these tattoos as a reflection of their lives and transition. Other significant themes discovered include: tattoos as permanence; as therapeutic; as storytelling; as reclamation; and as visibility. Overall, I conclude that tattoos play an important role in the lives of these 10 trans men: they are intimately related to their trans identities, as well as to different aspect of their lives.

Keywords: Transgender, Trans men, Tattoos, Identity, Non-binary, Transmasculine, Masculinity, Body Modification

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I would also like to thank the over 250 trans men who responded in the first five days to my original ad calling for participants. This number helped me realize just how important this project is and how many trans men want their stories heard. Thank you to the ten participants who took time out of their busy schedule to be interviewed by me. It is my hope that you feel this research did your story justice.

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Glossary

Some of the definitions that follow are adaptations from <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/>, <http://gender.wikia.com/wiki/Demiguy>, and <http://www.yourdictionary.com/self-identity>

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth align (e.g., man and assigned male at birth). If a person is not transgender, they are cisgender. The word cisgender is also commonly shortened to “cis.”

Coming Out: The process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one’s own sexuality or gender identity (to “come out” to oneself). The process by which one shares one’s sexuality or gender identity with others (to “come out” to friends, etc.).

Culture: Interrelated pattern of conduct, behaviour and action organised around symbols and conducts linked to normative elements such as values and norms that contribute to make a group distinct. These patterns are constructed while adjusting to the external environment. These patterns are transmitted through teaching and social pressure (Tremblay 2011).

Demiboy: A gender identity which describes someone who partially identifies as a man or boy, whatever their assigned gender at birth was. They may or may not identify as another gender in addition to feeling partially like a boy or man.

Demisexual: Little or no capacity to experience sexual attraction until a strong romantic or emotional connection is formed with another individual, often within a romantic relationship.

FTM: Female-to-male trans person.

Gender binary: The idea that there are only two genders and that every person is one of those two.

Gender expression: The external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanour, social behaviour, and other factors, generally understood in and through the categories of masculinity and femininity. Also referred to as "gender presentation."

Gender identity: The internal perception of one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or do not align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, and trans. Often confused with biological sex, or sex assigned at birth.

HRT: Hormone Replacement Therapy. For trans men (FTM), this includes testosterone.

Inked: Having tattoos. In the context of this research, some participants believe being "inked" and being "tattooed" are not the same thing. They believe that only individuals who know the history of tattoos may be considered "inked". Whereas individuals who do not know the history are simply "tattooed." This concept is further explained in the analysis section.

LGBT: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.

Passing: Trans people being accepted as, or able to "pass for," a member of their self-identified gender identity (regardless of sex assigned at birth) without being identified as trans.

Queer: Used as an umbrella term to describe individuals who do not identify as straight and/or who have non-normative gender identities. Can also be used as a type of political label and affiliation. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ community. The term "queer" can often be used interchangeably with LGBTQ (e.g., "queer folks" instead of "LGBTQ folks").

Self: In the context of this research, the self is related to one's gender identity. One's true self is only embraced once the individuals' gender identity and body align.

Self-Identity: Self-identity is the awareness of one's unique identity.

Stealth: A trans person who is not “out” as trans, and is perceived by others as cisgender.

Top surgery: Surgery for the construction of a male-type chest in FTM trans individuals.

They Pronouns: Pronouns are linguistic tools that we use to refer to people. The pronoun “They” is commonly used for individuals who do not identify within the gender binary, or those who prefer to use gender neutral pronouns.

Trans man: An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transgender people or transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as assigned female sex at birth (sometimes referred to as trans guy).

Transition / transitioning: This term is primarily used to refer to the process a trans person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

Trans/ transgender: An umbrella term for a person who feels their gender identity does not match their assigned gender at birth. Many different identities and labels may fall under this term, such as: genderqueer, non-binary identities, transsexual, and sometimes, intersex (if the person chooses to also identify as trans/transgender). It is important to remember that not everyone who is non-binary and/or transsexual categorizes themselves as trans/transgender.

Transsexual: An individual who identifies as a gender/sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. These individuals medically transition from either female to male or male to female with the help of hormones and/or surgery. There are individuals who choose to medically transitioning but do not use this term to refer to themselves. Instead, they use the term transgender to identify themselves with.

TS/TG: Transsexual/ Transgender.

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Introduction

Although much research has been conducted on the embodied experience of tattoos across cultures and subcultures (DeMello 1995; Rubin 1988; Sullivan 2009; Dickson et al. 2015; Ferreira 2014; Roberts; 2012; Johnson 2006; Klesse 2007; Kosut 2008, 2013; Schildkrout 2004), there is presently no research that focuses directly on female-to-male (FTM) trans individuals with tattoos, and how these tattoos help shape their body image, masculinity, and identity. In order to better understand and explore these concepts, this thesis aims to answer the following question: what roles do tattoos play in the development and perception of masculinity, identity, and the self for transgender men? To begin exploring this question, it is crucial to examine previous research done on this topic in order to situate the research that will be carried out for this thesis. As the literature review will demonstrate, there is limited research related to trans men and tattoos. At the time this topic was researched, I did not encounter any research which focused specifically on trans men and tattoos. Therefore, the research aims to fill this gap in the literature.

However, before discussing the contents of the literature review, it is crucial to elaborate two concepts, the self and identity. These two concepts are crucial in understanding the relationship of trans men with their development and the perception of their own identities, bodies, and self. According to Hewitt (1989), the self is a complex design woven through culture, which encompasses language, symbol, and discourse. The self is not present at birth, but instead arises through social interactions (Mead 1925). For Mead, social interactions take place within three intersubjective activities: language, play, and games (Mead 1925). The language dimension, in particular, is essential to the development of self. It is through the constant creation of language that groups emerge. Also, according to Mead, a person only acquires self-consciousness

intersubjectively: “a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective” (Honneth 1996:75). In other words, only through others is a person able to be conscious of themselves. This phenomenon is particular to humans and the social element is essential to the ‘objective’ perception of oneself: "The self arises in conduct, when the individual becomes a social object in experience to himself" (Mead 1922: 60). A person who becomes conscious of self is a person who takes and adopts the attitudes of the members of the group. For example, a person born within the skin of a “female body” will adopt or try to adopt the expected behaviours that are associated (and expected) with being female and with the roles of femininity in society. However, and most important for the present work, the self is not static; its construction is not linked only to one group (Cronk 1973:327). This suggests that the self can be continuously re-written by internalizing other claims such as those displayed in other trans individuals (Amodeo et al. 2015). As a result, when people meet, they build “selves” together as a group. With interaction, individuals view themselves as a social object of the others action allowing the self to be organized and brought under the control of the individual in the form of consciousness (Mead 1964 in Honneth 1996:75). Therefore, we take control of our ‘self’.

Identity became a site of confrontation during the 1960s (Calhoun 1994). Emerging in the United States, to be "oneself" came to be the slogan of an entire generation (Hoffman 1991). However, becoming one identity often emphasizes the lack of another identity and allows the emphasis on social exclusion making a discussion of identities important and relevant (Bauman 2004:12-20). Indeed, it is only with a refusal to be given protection against violence, or access to employment, or rights granted to others that identity becomes a concern. It is in these moments that a trans identity matters. But what is identity?

As noted by Joanna Phoenix, "the term identity has been used in a number of different ways in the last few decades" (1999:14). From the literature, I identified two problems: first, that the term identity has become a carry-all concept that sometimes means the individual is a member of a group or a category (Reicher 2004), such as a woman (gender identity), a gay person (sexual identity); sometimes the term points to a more subjective meaning, such as personal identity (Reicher 2004:928) or simply "identity" (Della Porta and Diani 2006:93-113). The second problem arises when identity is thought of as being permanent. When one's identity becomes reified it can be more easily rejected (Drury & al. 2003:192) or challenged by activists. I reject the conceptualisation of identity "as a fixed thing" (Drury & al. 2003:192) and conceive "identity" as contingent and its "fixity [...] is ultimately impossible" (Vahabzadeh 2003:45 in Tremblay 2011). Hence, identity is used conjointly with self and is understood as a project in constant flux, especially in terms of resistance and domination.

Establishing the concepts of the self and identity are crucial in understanding the themes arising from the literature review. The literature review gives an overview of three themes closely related to this topic: the importance of the skin's surface; the significance of tattoos for the self and society; and transgender identity formation. The first theme, the importance of the skin's surface, will explore three sub-themes: 1) thinking through the skin; 2) markings on the skin; and 3) the concept of 'second skin'. A discussion of these sub-themes will show how the skin's surface is crucial to look at as it helps in understanding how the skin and body are fully embedded within the self. The second theme, the significance of tattoos for the self and society, situates the importance of tattoos and body modifications in today's society. This theme will explore the popularization of tattoos through the tattoo renaissance, and discuss how tattoos are deeply rooted in an individual's self-identity. This theme is also discussed through three sub-themes: 1) history

of “deviance” related to tattoos; 2) the tattoo renaissance; and 3) self-identity and self-expression. The final theme, transgender identity formation, will explore how trans men’s transition and experiences help shape their identity and masculinity. This theme will be divided into four sub-themes: 1) masculinity and maleness; 2) the importance of passing; 3) owning one’s skin; 4) reaffirming identity with the help of others.

Within these three main themes, we will see that there is research done on important aspects of this topic, but there is a large gap in the literature where trans men and tattoos are concerned. This gap is important to fill for multiple reasons. First, in order to include trans men in more academic research. Second, for trans men to feel adequately represented in research. Third, to extend knowledge on this topic. Fourth, to fill in the gap in the literature and provide a view into the world of trans men with tattoos as it relates to their self and identity.

I decided to choose this topic because of my connection to the community. I am part of the trans community and have always been eager to read academic research and findings related to us, but I was surprised when I found few articles that engaged with issues of body modification. This gap in the literature drove my research on my community. The drive began during my undergraduate studies when I researched the importance of passing for queer trans men for my honours thesis. At that time, there was little existing research on the topic. Once this research was complete, I shared it online and found many people on social media that were interested in this type of research. The issue I came across was that these individuals wanted more. They wanted more research that included them, focused on trans men, and was conducted by a trans person. This topic came to me when, in the summer of 2014, I attended the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference and noticed that nearly everyone had tattoos. I then realized that all the people I knew who were trans also happened to have tattoos. I decided to explore this, as I was fairly certain there

had to be some type of connection between being trans and having tattoos. Upon researching for months, it became apparent that I was on to something, so this thesis was born.

I am someone who is very active within the community through social media. I have a YouTube channel with over 120,000 subscribers and over 10 million views total. On this channel I talk about my life, my transition, mental health, I review products trans men/non-binary individuals may need, and I talk about other trans-related topics. My goal is to help people and provide valuable information about this community. I have created a platform where I am able to fully express myself and talk openly about my life and the issues trans people face today. I have a significant following, which helped me tremendously when it comes to accessing this community and finding participants for interviews. Within the first five days of posting the ad for participants for the current project, I received over 250 emails from people wanting to participate. This large number leads me to believe two things - trans men want more accurate representation in research, and trans men are interested in the topic and wish to learn more about the significance of tattoos among those in their community.

In order to explore the topic of trans men with tattoos, ten interviews were conducted. Following these interviews, a thematic analysis model was used in order to examine the data. Through this analysis, six themes emerged which will be discussed at length. I will argue that tattoos play specific and significant roles in the lives of the ten participants. These themes/roles will be discussed under the label “tattoos as...”, where each theme will be a continuation of this phrase. The themes are as follows, Tattoos as...: related to trans identity; permanence; therapeutic; storytelling; reclamation; visibility. Through these themes, it will become apparent that tattoos are significant in many ways, both individual and collective.

This thesis has several relevant contributions to the existing literature. First, as this is one of the first studies done on trans men with tattoos, it provides literature to help contextualize future projects related to this topic. Far too many times there is little research done on topics relevant to trans men. Second, it helps to add representation to trans men in academia. Not only is research being done on trans men, but I made it a priority to include a diverse sample population where half were TPOC (trans people of colour), and all ten participants had different life experiences. Lastly, it helps open up this world to individuals who would not normally have access to this community.

Chapter 1 Review of the Literature

This review will explore three themes extracted from the literature: the importance of the skin's surface, the significance of tattoos for the self and society, and transgender identity formation. To examine the first theme, the importance of the skin's surface, three sub-themes are outlined: 1) thinking through the skin, where identity and skin are understood as a necessary combination; 2) markings on the skin, where the permanence of body markings (tattoos, piercings, etc.) are embedded in identity; and 3) the concept of 'second skin', where the individual's true self is only visible once this second layer is removed. The second theme, the significance of tattoos for the self and society is divided into three sub-themes: 1) history of "deviance" related to tattoos, discussing how tattoos were only associated with deviance before the second half of the 20th century; 2) the tattoo renaissance, the time period where tattoos became associated with middle-class individuals and art; and 3) self-identity and self-expression, individuals getting tattoos in order to express who they truly are. The final theme, transgender identity formation, is separated into four sub-themes: 1) masculinity and maleness, as key in forming TS/TG individuals' identities¹; 2) the importance of passing, where the TS/TG individual feels as though their identity and transition are 'complete' once society views them as male; 3) owning one's skin, as a way of feeling in control of their bodies and identity, and 4) reaffirming identity with the help of others, including families and partners.

¹ A significant amount of research on trans men addresses this group of people as transgender and/or transsexual, therefore the term 'TS/TG' is used to include both

1.1 The Skin

This section examines and explains why the skin is important as an object of study in society. For this review, it is essential to understand the connection between the skin's surface and identity. In order to demonstrate this, three sub-themes will be introduced: thinking through the skin, markings on the skin, and the concept of 'second skins'.

1.1.1 Thinking Through the Skin

Ahmed and Stacey (2001) suggest that individuals need to look and think through the skin in order to understand the self and body more deeply: "We seek to think about the skin, but also to think with or through the skin" (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:1). Thinking through the skin aids in understanding the deeper meaning the skin (and the 'surface') have in an individual's identity and self. In Steven Connor's (2004) book, *The Book of Skin*, the author states: "the skin becomes the bearer and container of meaning" (p. 49). This 'meaning' is the self, and everything that constitutes it. Prosser (1998) discusses this by saying the individual's body is what is needed to form the self: "[t]he body is crucially and materially formative of the self" (p. 65). Without the body, skin, and surface, the self would not develop. Sullivan (2009) recognizes this: "the body is a site of symbolic resistance, a course of personal empowerment, and the basis for the creation of a sense of self-identity" (p. 130). Therefore, the self and identity are crystallised in and through the skin.

Considering the skin is visible and the first aspect a person sees, they may assume a person's cultural background, personality, and more through their perception, and interpretation, of the other's body surface. Schildkrout (2004) states that: "[s]kin is a visible way of defining individual identity and cultural differences" (p. 319). That said, Ahmed and Stacey (2001) believe there is much more to the skin than that of an identifier into the lives of individuals (p. 4). The

authors go into more detail: “not only is skin assumed to be a sign of the subject's interiority (for example, what it means to be white or Black, ill or well), but the skin is also assumed to reflect the truth of the other and to give us access to the other's being” (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:4). Ahmed and Stacey (2001) summarize their point as such: “[t]he skin is not like a mirror, it does not reflect the truth of the inner self” (p. 6). If the skin is not a mirror, then what is it? Prosser (1998) suggests the skin may be a ‘mask’, but then challenges this claim: “If skin is a mask, where is the self in relation to the body's surface? Deeper than the skin (underneath the mask)? or not ‘in’ the flesh at all?” (p. 62). If the self is encapsulated within the skin, but the skin is not a mirror or a mask into who the individual is, then it is safe to assume that the significance of skin and the self is “anything but skin deep” (Lafrance 2009:4). There are multiple physical and emotional layers, both on the skin and in an individual's identity, therefore, one cannot simply combine these two aspects without negating the significance of both as they are embedded with one another.

1.1.2 Markings on the Skin

The relationship between skin and the self is meaningful when examining markings on the skin. Markings come in different shapes and forms; this section will focus mostly on permanent markings on the skin, such as tattoos. As Sullivan (2009) explains, “[t]he human flesh has proven itself a suitable canvas on which to portray psychologically relevant themes” (p. 132). Sullivan is assigning a canvas, an inanimate object, to the same category as flesh, surface, and skin, thereby taking a lifeless object and turning it into something that lives, breathes, and experiences. The creation of permanent markings, whether on a living or still canvas, represents a form of artistic expression.

The permanence of tattoos on the flesh is embedded deeply within self-identity. Ahmed & Stacey (2001) state: “[t]he attempt to ‘mark’ the surface of the body is also an attempt to make the body ‘permanent’ and individual” (p. 8). The authors go deeper in understanding identity and the irreversible aspect of tattoos: “making a cut in the body does not mean that the subject is simply playing with his or her identity; by irreversibly marking the body, the subject also protests against the ideology that makes everything changeable” (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:9). Identity is factored into the permanence of tattoos, but the authors argue the subject is changing their body in a way that can never be changed back to its original form as an expression of themselves and their self-identity. Connor (2004) proposes a different view of the idea of the tattooed surface:

The tattoo substitutes a surface for the actual surface of the skin: but it does so in a way that plays with the knowledge that the skin has been penetrated, since the technique of tattooing in fact requires pigment to be injected beneath the surface of the skin. Thus what appears to lie on top of the skin, in fact lies below it. The body flaunts the surface that it has taken into itself as a secondary interiority. The fact that the tattoo is irremovable involves a similarly ambivalent play between injury and self-defence. Once marked, the skin can never again recapture its infantile immaculacy and clarity. (P. 63-64)

It is important to acknowledge the significance of the skin in relation to tattoos and self-identity. Marked skins tell stories, just as Connor (2004) states: “In all cases of marked skins [...] the mark on the outer surface of the body will be, and therefore partly signifies, a doubling. Somewhere, in some other place, on some other, or some inner skin, there will have been a more primary mark, of which the manifest is a copy or trace” (p. 135). The skin is then seen as an outer covering, or perhaps, a second skin.

1.1.3 Second Skin

The skin being seen as an “outer covering” can bring both advantages and disadvantages to an individual. On one hand, the skin “protects us from others,” but it also “exposes us to them” (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:1). Once individuals feel exposed through their skin, they “search for second skins when [they] feel that either [their] physical or mental boundaries require reinforcement” (Lafrance, 2009:19-20). Furthermore, Connor (2004) offers a metaphor: “[t]he second skin is inside the contours of the first as a hand is in a glove. The skin is beginning to occupy and itself become a convoluted space” (p. 136).

Prosser (1998) discusses, in more detail, the concept of the ‘second skin’ by relating it to transsexual individuals. Prosser argues: “transsexuality is precisely a phenomenon of the body’s surface” (p. 62). He adds:

Transsexual subjects frequently articulate their bodily alienation as a discomfort with their skin or bodily encasing: being trapped in the wrong body is figured as being in the wrong, or an extra, or a second skin, and transsexuality is expressed as the desire to shed or to step out of this skin. (Prosser 1998:68)

For Prosser (1998), this second skin is the layer under the surface of the skin. The act of removing the surface layer of skin frees the individual from being “surrounded by ‘false skin’” (p. 68). If the individual is unable to remove the surface layer (false skin), they are left with a dissatisfying view of their body. Prosser (1998) discusses the metaphor of the body as a diver’s suit, as well as its wearers desire to step out of it: “[t]he image of the body as a diver’s suit suggests that the subject’s authentic self might be revealed if only the outer layer of the visible body could be peeled off, like a diver’s suit (p. 68). The individual knows it is their body, but their true ‘authentic self’ is hidden under the diver’s suit (the second skin) (Prosser 1998:68). Without removing this outer layer, the

body is covered in a fake outer casing with nothing but a hollow shell inside (Prosser 1998:68). He points out, however, that the skin cannot be removed completely because the self would go with it. Finally, he states - quoting French psychoanalysis Didier Anzieu - that: “[t]o be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one’s own” (Prosser 1998:73).

1.2 Significance of Tattoos

Why do so many people have tattoos? Has western society's view of tattoos changed over time? What significance do they hold on a personal and cultural level? These are some of the questions this section aims to answer. The significance of tattoos is important to discuss as tattoos have become increasingly popular over the years. DeMello (2016) states that in 2012, Americans spent over 1.65 billion dollars on tattoos annually and 21% of adults had at least one tattoos (p. 21). This was also discussed by Letherby and Davidson (2016) who explain that 38% of millennials have tattoos and that 19% have more than one (p. 57). It comes as no surprise that tattoos are significant in today’s society when looking at these reported numbers. Within this section, three sub-themes have been introduced to examine the reasons why tattoos are relevant, and have become such a phenomenon in this society. The sub-themes are: history of “deviance” in relation to tattoos, the tattoo renaissance, and self-identity and self-expression.

1.2.1 History of “Deviance” Related to Tattoos

Tattoos have gone from being associated with so-called social deviants such as prisoners, bikers, “freaks,” and gang members (DeMello 1995:38; Ferreira 2014:305-306), to being embraced by mainstream media, as well as middle class educated professionals (DeMello 1995:38). This shift, however, did not occur overnight. According to Victor Sergio Ferreira (2014), during the second

half of the 19th century, tattoos were exclusively seen on people associated with "circus freak shows and traveling fairs, alongside dwarfs, giants, Siamese twins, bearded women, and other 'monsters' and/or 'primitive curiosities'" (p. 305). At the beginning of the 20th century, tattoos became more popular in neighbourhoods with high rates of crime and "bad reputations" (Ferreira 2014:305). This included: sex workers, ex-convicts, gang members, sailors, labourers, dockers, and "other type[s] of scoundrel[s]" (Ferreira 2014:305). During the second half of the 20th century, tattoos were embraced by youth who adopted them as a symbol against mainstream society (Ferreira 2014:306). Individuals in modern society are still using tattoos as a way to rebel against the system (Dickson et al. 2015:107; Fisher 2002:101; Johnson 2006:47), although they are more often used as a method of self-expression, fashion, and to demonstrate individuality (Ferreira 2014:306; DeMello 1995:41; Dickson et al. 2015:108; Johnson 2006:47; Schildkrout 2004:319). An example of this would be the educated, middle-class professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and individuals with PhDs who have tattoos (DeMello 1995:38). The increase of these individuals getting tattoos has shown a change in the stereotypical clientele of tattoo artists, such as bikers, sailors, and individuals of lower social status (DeMello 1995:38). According to DeMello (1995), these individuals believe that since tattoos and tattooing are now seen as an art form, they will move away from being associated with "low life" individuals and instead, will demonstrate their individuality (p. 38-40).

1.2.2 The Tattoo Renaissance

In 1988, Arnold Rubin coined the term "tattoo renaissance" in his ground-breaking book, *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (pp. 233-262). This refers to the shift from tattoos as 'deviant' to them being visibly accepted in Western society (Schildkrout 2004:335,

Wohlrab et al. 2009:202). The tattoo renaissance was not only a “rebirth” of technique, it was also a “social relocation” of the practice itself (Fleming 2000:61). It was a set of “artistic and cultural changes” that took hold which helped to further alter what the Western tattoo was (DeMello 2016:25). This, in turn, resulted in tattoos becoming “a more socially acceptable, less stigmatized, and popularized practice” (DeMello 2016:25). The first aspect is the change in clientele, from bikers, sailors, and gang members to the "middle and upper class" individuals (Schildkrout 2004:335, DeMello 1995:38). The second, is the change in iconography seen in tattoos (Schildkrout 2004:335). In the past, tattoos were more focused on "badge-like" images, or "flash" pre-made designs, whereas now they are full-body customized tattoos (Schildkrout 2004:335).

After the tattoo renaissance of the 1960-80s, tattoos began to be viewed as an art, instead of a "pedestrian craft" (Kosut 2013:142). In the mid-1990s, tattooing spread through mainstream society and mass media (Kosut 2013:143). People with tattoos now perceived it more as art, or collecting art on their "human canvas" (Kosut 2013:143). Kosut (2013) argues tattoos and tattooing have "undergone a process of being cleaned up, [...] authenticated, and ultimately valued by certain cultural specialists" (p. 143). The link between tattoos and art have made it easier for the mass media, society, museums, and galleries to be more accepting of tattoos, even going as far as to showcase them (Kosut 2013:143). Tattoos have become increasingly accepted within mainstream society, however, there are still some aspects of tattoos and tattooing that remain associated with deviance and marginalization (Kosut 2013:143). Tattoos are still largely associated with prison communities as well as major health concerns (Kosut 2013:143). For example, during the 1960s, some American states banned tattoos because they believed individuals with tattoos were no longer healthy (Kosut 2013:143). Soon after, tattoos were made illegal or only legal to those over 21. By 1968, 47 major American cities had prohibited tattoos altogether (Kosut 2013:143). Slowly

thereafter, tattoos started to gain wider acceptance but the health stigma associated with tattoos is still prominent today (Kosut 2013:143).

1.2.3 Self-Identity and Self-Expression

Although tattoos are still stigmatized and considered deviant (DeMello 1995:40; Ferreira 2011:306; Kosut 2008:81; Martí 2008:3; Klesse 2007:277), the literature indicates individuals are getting tattoos regardless, based on two main elements: self-identity and self-expression (Kosut 2008:80; Schildkrout 2004:321; DeMello 1995:41; Dickson et al. 2015:108; Ferreira 2014:304; Foltz 2014:594; Roberts 2012:158; Johnson 2006:53-54; Kang & Jones 2007:47; Kleese 2007:277; Sullivan 2009:130). This extensive list features researchers who discuss the reasons why self-identity and self-expression are embedded deeply in having tattoos. Tattoos can represent who an individual is, what their interests are, how unique they are, and for some, their “inclusion into tattoo subculture” (Foltz 2014:589; Kosut 2008:89). The need for inclusion in the tattoo subculture, or any other group, is important for the formation of an individual’s self-identity and group identity (Dickson et al. 2015:107, 154). It is important to understand that tattoos are a symbolic part of forming one’s identity (Johnson 2006:47), and as a way to express one’s self (Ferreira 2014:304). According to Dickson (2015), this creates a “deep personal quest to symbolize the self as it develops” (p. 118). Tattoos then become “identity markers that allow individuals to present themselves to others according to their socially developed aesthetic tastes” (Dickson et al. 2015:109). Individual tastes and preferences are crucial in developing the self, as well as understanding the self. Kosut (2008) argues: “tattoos may function as a documentary history of the self, display history of the self, display unresolved conflicts with the self, and can represent an excoriation of the self” (p. 90).

Many individuals get tattoos in order to commemorate important life events, which also helps frame the person's personal identity (Ferreira 2014:325). Kosut (2008) argues that tattoos are a way to establish one's body and "authentic self" (pp. 80, 92). This 'self' is tied to the individual's body, and as Ferreira (2014) states: "the self is revealed through the body. The body is a medium of expression, of self-experience and of social recognition" (p. 304). If the self is revealed through the body, and the body is tattooed, it is safe to conclude that being tattooed is an act of reclaiming one's identity, body, and self (Johnson 2006:50). In terms of recognition and visibility, DeMello (2016) states: "tattoos are one of the most visible ways in which culture is marked on the body...tattoos can help us to remember, and, because of their very nature, can cause other people to take notice as well" (p. 28). Since tattoos are visible to others, the self is revealed through the body, as previously discussed by Ferreira. This is also true for memorial tattoos, as they are a permanent reminder of certain life events and important people in their lives (DeMello 2016:25). DeMello (2016) states:

Because of the permanent nature of tattoos, they are the perfect vehicle for inscribing on the body a visible reminder of a loved one or an important kinsman. Tattoos are also an excellent medium for commemorating a significant person or cultural event. (P. 25)

Tattoos are then used as a tool of visibility, a way to remember individuals and events, and to express one's self.

Reclaiming one's body is crucial in the development of the self. Fisher (2002) states: "tattooing means a cultural reappropriation of the body" (p. 103). In society, the body is commodified; getting and having tattoos helps to reconnect the individual with their body and feel as though they have some power over it (Fisher 2002:103). Schildkrout (2004) illustrates that bodies are seen as virtual in today's society, by getting tattoos (or body art), it implies "a sustained

effort to reverse the dematerialization of art by making the body matter” (p. 320). Making the body matter and inscribing it with art (or tattoos) is “a struggle for individualization in a society that is increasingly impersonal...they are signs of resistance of the impermanence and conservative world today” (Johnson 2006:47). Roberts (2012) agrees with this by adding that “the ability of tattoos to serve as an unchangeable reminder of the true self makes them highly desirable” (p. 154). The act of resisting this impersonal society and getting tattoos allows the individual to own their bodies, as well as live with them (Kosut 2008:96). The author also states that it is crucial to the individual to feel as though they own their bodies (Kosut 2008:96). Klesse (2007) agrees and adds that: “Body modifiers frequently experience themselves as active agents in a creative process of shaping their own body” (p. 277). By playing an active role in forming their identities through getting tattoos, these individuals feel a sense of self-control and empowerment which furthers their sense of self (DeMello 1995:37).

1.3 Transgender Identity Formation

The final theme examines how transgender men form their identities and masculinities during their transition. This will be explored through four sub-themes: masculinity and maleness, importance of passing, owning one’s skin, and reaffirming identity through the help of others. A significant amount of research on trans men addresses this group of people as transgender and/or transsexual, therefore the term ‘TS/TG’ will be used to include both.

1.3.1 Masculinity and Maleness

Masculinity and maleness is a crucial part in the development of identity for FTMs. Halberstam (1998) discusses the importance in understanding how masculinity is not and should not “be

reduced down to the male body” (p. 1). This means that masculinity encompasses many different body types and identities and should not be reduced to the male body only. Once an individual understands that masculinity can be embraced by any type of person, they are able to form their own self-defined masculinity (Halberstam 1998:2). Halberstam (1998) puts emphasis on many different types of masculinities such as: lesbian masculinities, butch masculinities, and FTM masculinities (p. 154). The author describes these alternate masculinities as queer and something one can reshape into their own² (Halberstam 1998:2). According to Detloff (2006) and Halberstam (1998), different types of masculinities allow the FTM individual to fashion their own gendered self (p. 88; 154).

Rubin’s (2003) book *Self-Made Men* is important in discussing trans-masculinity and embodiment. However, taking an opposing approach from Halberstam, Rubin states: “bodies are a crucial element in personal identity formation and perception” (2003:11). Shaping one’s body according to their needs is key in forming their identity. Rubin (2003) discusses the disembodiment FTMs feel during their first puberty and how, during this period, they feel as though they “[lose] a sense of themselves” (p. 94). Once the “process of sexual development took over their bodies, they felt simultaneously disembodied and acutely aware of their bodies” (Rubin 2003:94-95). By becoming aware of their ‘female’ bodies, FTM individuals’ experiences of disembodiment give them awareness of their difference from females and their relationships to their bodies (Rubin 2003:95). This may cause trauma to an FTM individual, such as feelings of isolation, alienation, or the inability to socialize (Rubin 2003:96, 99). Rubin (2003) illustrates that all the FTM individuals in his study identified themselves as men, but not all ‘act’ stereotypically masculine

² It is worth noting that some research finds FTMs can also be conventionally masculine and not adhere to the “alternate masculinities” these authors are proposing.

and therefore were not “masculine in temperament” (p. 144). The author emphasizes that rejecting a ‘macho’ masculinity was their own embodiment of masculinity as opposed to the behaviours and social roles society labels and associates with men (Rubin 2003:144). FTM individuals do not need to demonstrate their masculinity once they begin to pass (as male), as their embodiment and appearance is masculine. These FTM individuals develop alternate forms of masculinity by modifying their bodies and projecting their mannerisms in whatever way they feel comfortable (Rubin 2003:145). Their male bodies are more important to them than their ‘male’ roles (Rubin 2003:145). Once these individuals start to pass in society, their embodied masculinity changes to a point where they no longer need to abide by the ‘male roles’ to which they attached themselves before passing as male (Rubin 2003:146). Testosterone is seen as the “source of male embodiment” as it drastically changes the appearance of an individual over a period of time (Rubin 2003:153). FTM individuals value and rely on these changes in order to be read by society as who they are and as a way to “reflect their core identities” (Rubin 2003:153). Some FTM individuals believe they need to overcompensate in terms of their masculinity because society does not view FTMs as having a “male” body (Rubin 2003:166).

1.3.2 The Importance of Passing

The concept of finally being seen as a man is discussed as ‘passing’ in the literature. The definitions and interpretations of ‘passing’ are different for many FTMs as well as many academics in the field (Garfinkel 1967; Schrock 2009; Halberstam 1998; Roen 2002; Namaste 2005; Rubin 2003). Garfinkel (1967) discusses the ‘work’ individuals must physically go through in order to pass (pp. 118, 137), whereas Schrock et al. (2009) discuss the ‘emotion’ and inner work individuals must complete. Schrock et al. (2009) discusses ‘emotion work’ which transgender individuals need to

do in order to move through a 'status passage' (p. 702). This 'emotion work' consists of: preparing one's self emotionally to go out into society; entrusting their emotional well-being to others to see if they are passing; and emotionally processing past embarrassing and threatening public experiences (Schrock et al 2009:705,707-708). This involves learning how to suppress emotions and replacing them with new emotions in order to move through life seamlessly (Schrock et al. 2009:707). Emotion work, according to the authors, is a process "to facilitate public gender performance, which aids their transition" (Schrock et al. 2009:702). An individual is only able to go through 'status passage' if they have done the necessary 'emotion work' required. Thus, passing is more than a sociocultural process devoid of internal negotiations. It is, instead, the product of a complex interplay between internal and external processes.

Namaste's (2000) landmark chapter 'Gender Bashing' in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, discusses the issue of safety for TS/TG individuals. Individuals who are unable to pass during their transition are at risk of being "bashed" because of their nonconforming appearance (Namaste 2000:136). The author warns that individuals who live outside society's rigid categorization of male and female are at risk of assault (Namaste 2000:136). Living outside the normative gender structure of society is common for FTMs who have just begun to transition (Namaste 2000:140). FTMs are at risk when their gender is not easily identifiable; therefore, passing is necessary in order to avoid such risk (Namaste 2000:144). Namaste (2000) describes society's obsession with the gender binary as a 'cultural coding' network where TS/TG individuals who do not pass are stuck and at risk (p. 145). The culture and society individuals live in dictate the two-gender system and individuals are required to abide by it. In the same vein, Halberstam (2005) explains that the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, a trans man, was fueled by the enforcement of the gender binary. According to Halberstam, Brandon's 'friends' responded

with violence when they discovered he was 'born female' because his passing constituted a gender transgression (p. 42). Halberstam illustrates that individuals from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities were not surprised by the occurrence of this event, as this type of violence is 'normal': "...as if brutality was an inevitable consequence of trying to pull off such a risky endeavor as passing for male in some godforsaken place" (2005:45). This act of violence reiterates the risk for TS/TG individuals in society.

Whereas previous authors discuss the physical aspect of safety, Katrina Roen (2001) discusses the emotional safety of TS/TG individuals (p. 504). If a TS/TG person passes and becomes invisible in society, they sometimes begin to feel ostracized from their community (Roen 2011:504). This may lead to isolation and loneliness, which affects the TS/TG individuals' emotional safety (Roen 2011:504). The emotional state may also be dangerous in individuals who do not pass, as passing is viewed throughout the community as necessary (Roen 2011:504). Paradoxically, individuals who do not pass will feel ostracized from their communities as well (Roen 2011:504). These individuals may also face much transphobia, employment risks, and threats to personal safety (Roen 2011:504). Roen (2011) is one of few who addresses issues of class, race, and education. She states: "Who counts as transsexual rests on who can pass, which depends partially on who has access to reassignment technologies and is therefore influenced by class, race, education, and so on" (Roen 2011:511). This type of assessment is imperative when discussing transitioning and passing in society. Taking into account race, class, and education makes for a more inclusive representation of the population and a view of how individuals who do not have these privileges are marginalized further than white, middle class, educated FTM TS/TG individuals.

Being ‘misrecognized’ or ‘found out’ is hurtful for the TS/TG individual who intends on passing, and fear goes along with this ‘discovery’ (Garfinkel 1967; Schrock et al. 2009; Snorton 2009). Many TS/TG individuals are fearful of this ‘discovery’ because it could cause physical and emotional abuse, as well as a failure of identity. Schrock et al. (2009) explains that individuals who are identified and recognized as TS/TG, disrupt the ‘status passage’ and no longer pass (p. 703). In other words, once the TS/TG individual is identified, all the emotion work and practice they put in their own ‘psychical’ gender performance disappears. The work these individuals put into their inner selves gets rejected, which can be devastating. As mentioned above, once this occurs, the individual is left with feelings of embarrassment, hopelessness, and fear that society does not see them as who they really are (Schrock et al. 2009:703). Snorton (2009) discusses ‘misrecognition’ as a common occurrence in the lives of transgender individuals (p. 82). Being “misrecognized/ unseen/ wrongly viewed” affects the “production of the self” which “serves as a context for the emergence of selfhood” (Snorton 2009:82). Those who are trying to pass in society and do not succeed may suffer in the development of their selfhood and identity.

1.3.3 Owning One’s Skin

As mentioned by Snorton (2009), passing affects the production of self, identity, and selfhood, therefore successfully passing in society is key to owning one’s self. Prosser’s (1998) chapter entitled *A Skin of One’s Own*, discusses transsexuality, body ownership and embodied experience (p. 61). Prosser explains: “transsexuality is precisely a phenomenon of the body’s surface” (1998:62). For TS/TG individuals, owning the experience of this phenomenon is key to understanding and owning their own bodies. According to Prosser’s definitions, once passing is complete in society and there are no possibilities for ‘misrecognition’, the individual has found

their own self (1998:62). Schrock et al. (2009) also mentions something similar: “transsexuals become confident ‘once they accept their gender as unquestionable’” (p. 703).

Passing is a crucial element in identity formation for TS/TG individuals. Green (2000) discusses how many FTMs’ lives improve after they start passing. Individuals are able to let go of their previous worries related to passing, such as safety (p. 502). To outline this feeling, Green (2000) conducted interviews with FTM individuals, with one describing passing in the following terms: “It was a great relief to be able to shake off layers of defensive behaviours developed to communicate my humanity from inside my incategorizability” (2000:502). Previous to this, the individual did not pass in society as male, but once he started passing regularly, it was as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Instead of being stared at, the individual was able to live his life without constant worry (Green 2000:502). This constant worry is enforced by society’s pressure of a two-gender system where individuals in the middle are marginalized.

1.3.4 Reaffirming Identities with the Help of Others

Some TS/TG men get help from individuals around them in reaffirming their identities and masculinity. Ward’s (2010) article titled “Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression”, discusses the work female partners of transgender men do in order to validate their identities and masculinities (p. 236). It is important to note that Ward’s work cannot necessarily be applied to all queer, gay, or bisexual men as the author focuses solely on trans men who were currently dating women. According to the author, there are three types of labour which effectively validate transgender men’s masculinity (Ward 2010:242). The labour of ‘being the girl’, where the female partner takes on the feminine role in all aspects of the relationship (Ward 2010:242). Transgender men view masculinity as ‘not being the girl’, therefore the female partner

needs to take on this role: “trans masculinity has frequently been described as the experience of not being, or not wanting to be, a girl” (Ward 2010:242). The second labour being ‘the labour of forgetting’, where the female partner forgets, or ‘does not see signs of femaleness’ (Ward 2010:246). Here, the female partner is expected to forget any known aspect of their partner’s previous ‘femininity’ and make them feel as though being transgender has no bearing on their relationship (Ward 2010:246). This labour is put in place in order to authenticate trans masculinity (Ward 2010:247). The third and final labour is ‘the labour of alliance’, where female partners find their space in the community by attending SOFFA (Significant Other, Family, Friends and Allies) meetings (Ward 2010:248). In this realm, partners are better able to understand the struggles and learn how to manage their relationships and their partner’s identity and masculinity (Ward 2010:248). Green (2004) says this (about his partner):

She encouraged a level of openness in me that was only possible for me since my body had become more masculine. She acknowledged my transness and the special awareness and abilities I had because of my trans experience. I was ready for a relationship then because I was finally in touch with and happy with my own body, and, like many adolescents, I was interested in experimenting with it. (P. 153)

Green (2004) needed his partner’s help in order to realize his potential in the relationship and in his own trans identity. Rubin (2003) discusses how queer men who are in relationships with FTMs aid in building the TS/TG man’s masculine identities. The author explains three ways their husbands or boyfriends help this identity: (1) by being their sexual partners, they are able to reinforce their queer sexuality; (2) by being models of masculinity that FTM individuals can pattern themselves after, and; (3) by “being vehicles into gay life” (Rubin 2003:118). By modeling

themselves on their male partners, FTM individuals are able to visualize maleness and masculinity and translate that into their own lives and bodies.

Conclusions

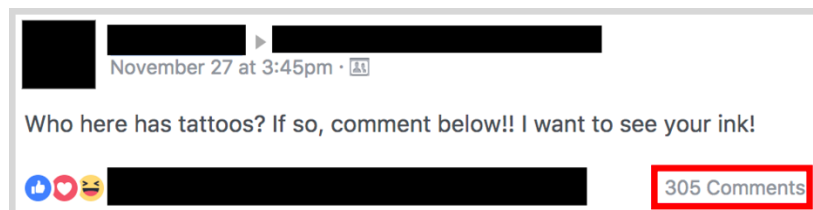
Although much has been documented and researched on the topic of skin, tattoos, and trans identity, no research specifically encompasses all three. This literature review presented an overview of the scholarship on why the skin is crucial; how tattoos came to be in popular to issues of embodiment and identity, and what they mean in Western society; and how transgender men's identities form throughout their transitions. All three themes (and their associated sub-themes) create a basis in understanding where this research starts and continues. The gap in the literature is evident, but by doing interviews with multiple people from the FTM community who have tattoos, I intend to fill this gap and provide an opening into the world of tattoos in the lives of transgender men, as it relates to their masculinity, body image, self, and identity.

Chapter 2 Methodology

The idea for this research began in June 2014 when I attended the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The aim of this conference is to educate healthcare providers and hold spaces for community members to network and discuss important topics pertaining to trans individuals. I attend this conference every year in order to network, learn about and connect with my community, and meet others. After four days of attending this conference, I noticed one thing that just about everyone had in common: tattoos. Many attendees had tattoos - some visible, some hidden, some peeking out from underneath clothing. Others showed me their tattoos when they saw the fresh ink on my shoulder from a tattoo that I had gotten a week prior. It struck me that tattoos appeared to be an important phenomenon in the trans community and I was interested in understanding why this was the case. Is there a connection between trans identity and tattoos? Why do so many trans people have tattoos? Do trans people get tattoos related to their transition and trans identity often? Do tattoos help trans people reclaim their bodies? These were some of the questions to which I wanted answers.

In July 2015, I started preliminary searches on EBSCO of 'transgender' and 'tattoos' and yielded no results. However, when looking up "LGBT" (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and "tattoos", a number of articles appeared. The limitations of these articles was that the author focused on the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) part of the community and completely left out the T (Transgender). I did not find representation of transgender individuals in any of these articles. As my literature review demonstrates, there is sufficient evidence to show there is a gap in the literature regarding trans identity and tattoos. This is surprising as I witnessed hundreds of trans people with tattoos at the conference, and almost weekly, there are posts on multiple social media sites and groups prompting other trans members to "show off" their tattoos. Thus far, these posts

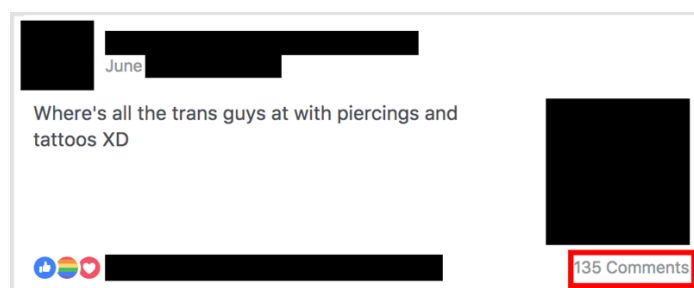
have gathered a very large response (some with over 300 comments) and are posted frequently (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).



(Figure 1: Screenshot of a post on an FTM group on Facebook demonstrating the amount of comments within a 48-hour period. Screenshot was taken on November 29th)



(Figure 2: Screenshot of a post on a FTM Facebook group demonstrating the amount of comments a post about tattoos yields)



(Figure 3: Screenshot of a post on a FTM Facebook group demonstrating the amount of comments a post about tattoos yields)

2.1 Recruitment

Following my participation at the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference, I decided to interview ten trans men who currently have tattoos. I wanted the firsthand and lived experiences from trans individuals for this research. I wanted them to speak for themselves and tell their story their way.

As I am part of this community, I had no problem accessing the population. Throughout the years, I have had a YouTube channel where I talk about different trans-related topics. This channel, and my other social media accounts, have grown in popularity and have enabled me to gain access to a vast number of individuals within this community. This has also provided me with a platform to discuss previous research I have conducted and be trusted to respect participant's stories and experiences. I will discuss my bias later on in this section.

In December 2015, an ad was placed on numerous private *Facebook* groups, as well as on *Tumblr*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* with the hashtags: #ftm, #transgender, #research, #femaletomale #trans #thesis #tattoos. This ensured that the post would reach as many people as possible with diverse backgrounds and stories. The criteria laid out in the ad states that the person needs to: be 18 years old or over, identify as a female to male transgender or transsexual person, live in Canada or the United States, have tattoos (these tattoos may or may not be trans-related), be willing to speak about the relationship between their tattoos in relation to their trans identity, have access to Skype, and are comfortable being interviewed (see Appendix I).

Individuals were asked to email me at my research email: chaserossresearch@gmail.com. After five days, I received over 250 emails from all over Canada and the United States from individuals interested in being part of the proposed project. I replied to each email asking the individuals for more information: where they lived (state or province, if they were comfortable saying so), their ethnicity, age, and if they had tattoos, in order to assure they fit the scope of this research. Once potential participants replied to that email, a process of elimination was conducted. I deleted all the emails from people who did not fit the criteria and copy/pasted the information of the ones who did fit into a word document. Ten individuals were carefully chosen from this list, making sure there was a variety in age, location, ethnicity, and number of tattoos. It was important

to me to have a diverse mix of participants involved in this research in order to try and represent the community's diversity as much as possible. Consent forms were then sent out, and ten interviews were scheduled and conducted via Skype. I chose Skype interviews over in-person interviews as the pool of individuals would be larger and more diverse since people living anywhere in Canada and the United States could participate. I have found that Skype interviews are beneficial in that regard, but also because they allow the participant to stay in their home where they feel comfortable, especially when discussing sensitive topics, such as transitioning.

2.2 Overview of Population

This section will describe the participants involved in this research. All ten participants were asked to choose pseudonyms in order to remain anonymous. As discussed above, these participants were not chosen at random. A process of elimination was put in place in order to ensure that these participants were diverse. I wanted to make sure the intersectionality of their different identities was properly represented in this research. Below is an at-a-glance overview of the participants in this research (Figure 4).

	Age	Ethnicity	Location	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Sexuality	# of Tattoos
George	21	German, Vietnamese	Quebec, Canada	Trans man, Man	He/Him	Everyone	2
Alex	23	Caucasian	Columbia, MO	Trans Guy	He/Him	Queer	2
James	25	Irish and Ukrainian	Vancouver, BC	Transgender	He/Him	Straight	2
Logan	19	African American	Pittsburgh, PA	Trans man	He/Him	Demisexual, Queer	1
Shane	32	Indigenous Mayan Native	North Carolina	Binary Trans Man	He/Him	Heterosexual	7
Grey	23	Black Israeli	Atlanta, GA	Transmasculine, Non-Binary	They/Them	Queer	7
Andrew	22	Native American	Los Angeles, CA	Trans man	He/Him	Uncertain	6
Steve	30	Caucasian	Toronto, ON	Trans man	He/Him	Pansexual	12
JJ	23	White	Upstate New York	Trans man	He/Him	Queer	2
Eddie	23	White	Oakland, CA	Trans guy, Demiboy	He/Him	Pansexual	8

(Figure 4: At-a-glance overview of sample)

To discuss this table in more detail, the ten participants chosen for this research were between the ages of 19 and 32. During the first round of emails, where I asked potential participants to answer questions such as “what is your age, ethnicity, location”, I received messages from people between the ages of 16 and 38. Anyone underage or who did not fit the criteria was immediately removed as a potential participant. Other reasons that certain individuals did not fit were: they did not have any tattoos; they did not live in Canada or the United States; they were not able to do Skype interviews; and/or they did not identify as transmasculine or as a trans man. This left individuals between the age of 18 and 35.

As discussed previously, I wanted to make sure my research included individuals from many different backgrounds and ethnicities. This is why asking for their ethnicity/ethnic identity was crucial. In the table presented above, I have written down verbatim what the participants told

me when I asked what their ethnic background/identity was. Listed above, we can see that five participants identify their ethnicity as white (one stating they are Caucasian, and another “Irish and Ukrainian”). The other five participants ranged from a mix of German and Vietnamese, African-American, Indigenous Mayan Native, Black Israeli, and Native American. Grey originally stated that they were “Israeli” but then said, “I think it’s important that you include that I’m Black, Black Israeli”. Grey specified their ethnic background because they believe it is important to be accurately represented and described in this type of research and for other individuals who are also Black to feel represented. The next aspect was location. I was able to interview individuals from all over Canada and the United States. There are some participants from the East coast, West coast, French Canada, American south, and the Bible Belt: in other words, some came from what many might think of as progressive areas, and not so progressive areas. It is important to get a range of different experiences based on where individuals live.

The two next aspects are identity-based, relating to gender identity and sexuality. As seen above, six participants stated that they are trans men, while the others said something similar, such as transgender, transmasculine, and trans guy. One specified that he is a binary heterosexual trans guy and another specified they were non-binary - which is why the column for pronouns is included as it is important to state that one participant uses they/them pronouns. The aspect of sexuality was very similar for many of the participants. Seven stated they are either queer or pansexual, meaning they are attracted to anyone regardless of the person’s gender identity. One was uncertain and stated “I don’t think about that”, while two were exclusively straight. I may have an advantage in recruiting more queer trans men because of my online presence, and it is to this that I now turn to the following section: Identity of the Researcher.

2.3 Identity of the Researcher

In this section, I will situate myself as the researcher and discuss any biases this research may have. First and foremost, I am part of the trans community. This has enabled me to have access to a large population of people within this community that non-trans (cisgender) people may not have been able to access. Although being part of this community has its advantages, it is important that I recognize the privilege I have to be able to do this type of research. I am a 26 years old white, middle class, cis passing trans man. The privilege I hold in society is something I use in order to bring out the voices of those in the community who are rarely heard. During the recruitment phase of this research, I made sure to post my ad everywhere I could in order to get a well-rounded population that consisted of more than white trans men. When looking online, especially on YouTube and in the general media (T.V., movies, newspapers), the more prominent images shown are those of very fit, muscular, conventionally attractive, white trans men. I wanted to make sure my research was not focused only on this population, but instead, gave an equal chance to those of different ethnicities, religious beliefs, and backgrounds.

One of the reasons I was able to recruit such a large population of individuals in this community is because I am a well-known figure within it. As stated previously, I have a large following on YouTube, with over 120,000 subscribers and over 10 million total views. Many people in the community follow me because my videos are filled with information about the trans community and different aspects of transitioning. This is an advantage I have in gathering research participants, as well as having these participants trust that their stories will be told correctly. However, an issue that may arise is that some individuals may only want to be part of this research because they would like to talk to me one-on-one. Since this project is interview-based, potential participants may contact me without fitting the criteria or having relevant things to discuss

regarding the topic. This is not an issue I have encountered in the past, but I will state that most of the participants knew who I was prior and did mention watching my videos.

2.4 Methods

This research consisted of multiple phases. My methodology involved careful planning and execution, followed by analysis. The first phase was outlining questions for the interview, ending with 35 questions being chosen. Multiple topics were covered such as: transitioning, identity, and tattoos. The second phase consisted of the interviews. Ten participants were interviewed, with interviews lasting between 40-120 minutes. The analysis was done in the final phase using a thematic analysis model. The data was categorized into different themes demonstrating how tattoos play a role in the lives of these trans men.

2.4.1 Questions

The questions were initially developed in order to explore if there was a connection between the participants' trans identity and tattoos. The questions began with basic information about the individual: the pseudonym they chose for themselves, their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and geographic location. This information was crucial in assuring that the participants I was going to interview were diverse and represented, and that their intersectional identities were respected. Following this, questions about the individual's transition were asked in order to compare their transition timeline to their personal tattoo timeline. Some of these questions were: When did you realize you were trans? When did you come out? Have you started hormones?

Following this, questions about tattoos and identity were added. An example of these questions were: How many tattoos do you have? How old were you when you got your first tattoo?

Why did you get your first tattoo? These basic questions were intended to be an introduction to the individual's reasoning in relation to tattoos. I then decided to ask more questions about what they generally thought of tattoos and what they associate tattoos with, as well as if they liked their current tattoos, if they would ever change them, and if they have plans for future tattoos.

Finally, I asked the participants if they had any trans-related tattoos. This question was deliberately vague as I wanted the participants to interpret it in their own way. It could be a tattoo that is visibly trans (trans symbol, trans pride colors), or something more subtle. If the participant did not mention the connection between tattoos and their personal trans identity, at the end I added the question: Do you believe there is a connection between your tattoos and trans identity? This question was important for them to answer as I was curious if my original hypothesis, mentioned previously, was confirmed or not by my findings. Please see Appendix II for the complete list of interview questions.

It is worth noting that I deliberately avoided dramatizing the struggles and hard times a lot of trans people have gone through. I am trying to write against the typical narrative of what Julia Serano (2007) calls the “pathetic transsexual” (38-40). Trans individuals in the media (and academia) are often objectified through their bodies and their struggles. This is not to say the trans people in this research did not go through hard times, however, pressing the participants about why coming out was hard, why transitioning was hard, why gatekeeping was an issue, was not something related to the scope of this paper. This way, I avoid the “pathetic transsexual” narrative and let the participants tell their own stories instead of trying to fit them in a pre-set narrative.

2.4.2 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants between December 2015 and June 2016. These interviews were done via Skype (video) as I felt when discussing certain sensitive topics (such as transitioning), the individual would be more comfortable in their own home. This also gave them full control if they wanted to end the video call earlier, instead of walking away in person. I also preferred Skype interviews as I wanted a well-rounded population and wanted to interview individuals from across Canada and the United States. The only possible way for me to do this was through Skype. All interviews were recorded using an external recording device.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to give a preferred pseudonym for the purpose of being anonymous. The consent form was checked once more and briefly discussed at the beginning of the interview in order to ensure that the participant understood that this interview was voluntary and they were able to stop at any time. All 35 questions were asked and each interview lasted between 40 minutes to two hours. The purpose of these interviews was to have the participants explain their stories and experiences in their own words.

2.4.3 Analysis

I chose to do a thematic analysis because I believed this would make my research more accessible for the trans community. Many individuals in this community do not have access to research like this, or if they do, are not able to understand it fully due to the academic nature of it. Trans people still face many barriers in academia, and yet, many academics choose to write about them and often in inaccessible terms³. In my view, the people who are researched deserve to have access to

³ Perhaps the best example of this trend is Judith Butlers work in *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004)

research about them. This is why I aimed to write my thesis in a conversational tone, while remaining aware that it must be scholarly enough for academia. A thematic analysis was the primary method used for analyzing the data in this research. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them all in their entirety. This helped refresh my memory of the interviews as there was a long period of time - approximately eight months - between the interviews and the transcriptions. This also helped me go through the data in a preliminary manner and start to visualize potential themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as being a foundational method in qualitative research (p. 78). This method is flexible and consists of six phases which I followed and will lay out in this section. The authors describe the thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data” (p. 79). This research took the inductive model, where observation is done first, then patterns are identified, which then leads to a hypothesis and conclusion (p. 83). This is the “process of coding the data without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (p. 83).

The six phases of a thematic analysis will be outlined below. Phase 1, familiarizing yourself with your data, is about transcribing the interviews in order to start identifying key phrases and visualize potential themes (p. 87). On a sheet of paper, I wrote down emergent patterns that were recurring in multiple interviews. This was helpful in Phase 2, generating initial codes, where I had to go back to the transcribed interviews and start coding. Coding this data was broken down into three main sections. The first section was basic information which I colour coded, the second was anything related to transition, and third was anything related to tattoos. This helped me break down the data in order to visualize different themes. Once this breakdown was completed, I went through each interview and marked specific aspects which I thought would be interesting, as well as themes

or subthemes I had seen in other transcribed interviews. I made sure to give equal attention to all data in order to “identify aspects that may form the basis of repeated patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006:88). Unsure if I had completely exhausted the data, I went through it a second time. To my surprise, I found new themes that I had not seen originally. This helped me make a list of keywords for each interview, along with key phrases and sentences. This was a great help when I was entering Phase 3, searching for themes. Since I had made a list of key points from each interview, it was simple to connect ideas and thoughts together to form potential themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as “sorting the different codes into potential themes” and to “start thinking about the relationship between codes” (p. 89). Phase 4, reviewing themes, is when I had to decide how I would organize the themes in this research. I decided to divide the themes based on the roles tattoos have played in the lives of these trans men. I did this because there was so much data that needed to be discussed that could not fit in the two other models. This way, even if a theme was smaller, it was easier to group the data together, and it made the analysis much stronger. The authors call this process “refinements”, where some themes that may have appeared as themes are shown to not be themes at all (p. 90). This is a two-step process, where you review the themes and see if there is a pattern, and if there is, you have to “consider the validity of the individual theme in relation to the data set and if the thematic map reflects the data set as a whole” (p. 90). It is worth noting that for this project, a thematic map was not built. Instead, key words and phrases were written down randomly on a sheet of paper and links were made between them. Once this was done, the second step was implemented: are these themes valid and do they reflect the data set as a whole?

Phase 5, consists of defining and naming themes, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that defining and refining the chosen themes is characterized by “identifying the essence of what each

theme is about” (p. 92). Once this is complete, a detailed analysis of each theme is written, where I am “telling” the story of my data, in relation to my original research question (p. 92). This brings us to Phase 6, which is producing the report. In this final phase, a detailed report, where themes and extracts are connected and embedded within a broader narrative, was produced (p. 93).

Chapter 3 Analysis and Discussion

“Tattoos are great, being trans is great - it only makes sense that the two are together”
-Grey (research participant)

Tattoos as...

While there is ample research on tattoos and identity in various cultural contexts (DeMello 1995; Rubin 1988; Sullivan 2009; Dickson et al. 2015; Ferreira 2014; Roberts; 2012; Johnson 2006; Klesse 2007; Kosut 2008, 2013; Schildkrout 2004), what the literature fails to explore is the relation between tattoos and the trans community, more specifically, trans men. This gap is all the more surprising given that, as my data will show, tattoos are extremely prevalent in the transmasculine community. There are groups and web pages dedicated to trans men with tattoos on Facebook and Tumblr, where individuals share their own tattoos and discuss the reasons behind them. This section will explore how the ten trans men interviewed for this project relate to their tattoos and their trans identity. Different themes have emerged and have been divided up according to the tattoo's personal meanings as well as the role it plays in the participants lives and identities as trans people. The title of this section is “Tattoos As...”, where each theme will be a continuation of this phrase to emphasize the multiple roles tattoos have in each of the participant's lives. These themes indicate that tattoos are understood by the participants in the following terms: as related to their trans identity; as permanence; as therapeutic; as storytelling; as reclamation; and as a tool of visibility.

3.1 Tattoos as...Related to trans identity

The most prevalent theme which emerged from the data, describes tattoos in relation to the individual's trans identity. The first section, tattoos as a connection to trans identity, discusses half of the participants (five total) who believe there is a direct link between their tattoos and their trans identity. The second section, tattoos as an indirect connection to trans identity, explores how the remaining participants relate to their tattoos by exploring their decision to get tattooed, the personal meaning of each tattoo, and how it indirectly relates to their transition and trans identity. These two sections will also act as an introduction to each participant in order to understand their stories, reasoning, and interpretation of their own tattoos. This information will be valuable when exploring the five other themes in this research.

3.1.1 Connection to Transition and Trans Identity

This section will explore the five participants who believe there is a direct connection between their tattoos (symbols) and their trans identity. Based on the definition of self-identity and its relationship to symbols, the objective is to examine the motivation, justification, and reasoning behind why these five trans individuals (four of the participants identify as trans men, one identifies as a non-binary trans person) connect their tattoos to their identity as trans people.

James, a 25-year-old white trans man from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, believes his tattoos are connected to his transition and trans identity. James has two tattoos, one on his back and one on his forearm. The first tattoo says “believe” and is located on his back. He decided on this tattoo after he suffered emotional and physical pain from a car accident:

The one on my back I got after I got hit by a car, and it just it was a rough time and I needed a little extra ‘ummph’, I’d always wanted to get a tattoo and it kind of just came to me and I was like ‘yeah this is that one I want to get’ so I went and got it... (James p. 2.7)

His second tattoo is a quote which reads, “It’s never too late to become the person you were meant to be”, and includes the date he started taking testosterone, a treatment known as Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). James states that for him, this tattoo is completely connected to his life, transition, and his trans identity (and influences who he is as a person). When asked why he decided on this tattoo and where the idea came from, he explained the moment he saw the quote and how it made him feel. Months went by and he could not stop thinking about it, and it was then he knew it was the right one for him:

I was honestly walking through Winners and it was one of those [quotes] that was on the stupid signs that they have and I just saw it and I was like ‘oh my god this is perfect’. I couldn’t come up with a better quote myself. And then I just sat on it for a couple of months, “do I want to get this on my body”, “am I sure?” And I’m like “yeah let’s do it”. I just went in and was like come on, put it on haha. (James p. 3.1)

James claimed that this tattoo represents him on an indescribable level. Over the years, he would read different inspirational quotes friends would post on Facebook, and felt as though he could identify partially, but never fully, with any of them. When asked how he knew this was the quote that represented him completely, he stated “you just know”. This connection is extremely personal to James because he likes that he can attribute this meaning not only to his life as a whole, but also intimately to his transition. He has always felt as if he was transitioning much later than most, and was “late to the game”. This tattoo connects to his trans identity on a deep level, where it represents his drive, persistence, and courage to transition despite feeling as if he transitioned late.

When asked about his personal connection between his tattoos and his trans identity, James says:

It just reminds me of the struggles that I've gone through. The years of questioning and 'am I sure about this' and I mean I did what most [trans]guys have done and came out as a lesbian at the end of high school, and wasn't really sure if this is where I fit and it didn't feel right. ...This is not clicking and I mean, my mom kept pushing me, going like "what about transgender" and she actually brought me to meet a family friend who is MTF and I talked to them and it was kind of like 'hmmm maybe this is where I fit'. So I started Googling...and then finding YouTube videos of these guys going through transitions. And reading what they were going through and seeing the videos of how they knew they were transgender and then [it] clicked, I need this, how do I do this...This quote fits my transition to such a 't' that it's unbelievable. And it puts everything into one sentence and I couldn't put it any better honestly because I transitioned so late. And people, my mom, my friends, remember me saying I wanted to be a boy when I was little but I don't remember that making any sense it just yeah. I was a little late to the party but I'm here. I'm finally getting to be who I want to be and it works so much better now and [the quote] just fits it so perfectly. (P. 5.13)

In this example, we see that James struggled for years trying to understand his identity and where he fit in. Initially he explored a lesbian identity because he did not know there were other possibilities. Once he realized what 'transgender' was and that transition was obtainable (through seeing videos of people who have transitioned), he was able to visualize his life and realized this is what he was meant to do and meant to be. The tattoo is a symbol of the realization of this identity. This aspect relates to the definition of culture, as described by Tremblay (2011), whereas culture is an "interrelated pattern of conduct, behaviour, and action organized around symbols.

James is better able to accept himself and his trans identity when looking down at his tattoo. He has always felt that he transitioned too late, and the quote “It’s never too late to become the person you were meant to be” is a perfect reminder that he is doing the right thing no matter how old he is. This tattoo is a symbol not only of the realization of his identity, but of his acceptance of his identity. He is now able to embrace himself and his trans identity through his tattoo.

James explains that if he were not trans, he would not have gotten the second tattoo on his forearm: “the one on my arm is definitely *extremely* related to my transition. If I wasn’t [sic] trans, I definitely wouldn’t have it” (p. 2.5). He also states that after he has top surgery, he will be getting tattoos to try and cover up his scars to “hide them a little.” He is not ashamed of his trans identity, but when people ask what his second tattoo means, he does not go into his entire life story unless he trusts them. He prefers to keep that part of his life to himself and only share it with certain individuals. It is worth noting that there appears to be a tension and contradiction with what James has done and what he says. His tattoo is in a visible place (forearm), yet he wants to keep the meaning hidden. Perhaps James likes the idea of “hiding in plain sight”, but this did not come up during our interview. This may be related to his desire to be stealth as well (not telling others about his trans identity). This is why getting a tattoo to cover up his top surgery scars is important to him. His trans identity does not solely rely on having tattoos, but his tattoos seem to rely on his trans identity.

Grey is a 23-year-old non-binary individual from Atlanta, Georgia, USA, who uses the pronouns “they/them/their”. They are Israeli but stated, “I think it’s important that you include that I’m black, Black Israeli”. Grey has seven tattoos and identifies two as being related to their trans identity. The first tattoo, which is relevant for this research, is related to the military and is the

phrase “dare to be different” on their wrist. This phrase holds many different meanings for Grey and it is important to understand why:

I was the first person in my family to go into the military, which is why the quote ‘dare the be different’ is on there. But it’s not only about that because there’s a lot of things that make me different from everyone else, including the trans identity part as well...Continue to be yourself...even if you don’t know who you are, doing what you’re doing or like what you like that doesn’t make it wrong or weird or anything. (P. 3.17)

Grey connects this tattoo to their trans identity, as a signifier of being different. They do not downplay the significance of the aspects of their life that set them apart, rather they celebrate these moments. For example, as the first member in their family to join the military, they use this experience as a point of pride and to remember that being different is not a bad thing. Grey states they joined the military because they had a powerful drive to serve their country. When asked about masculinity and gendered expectations that have come to be associated with the military, such as a hegemonic (dominant) masculinity, Grey had not made that connection when they decided to join the military. They also did not have further comments on the aspect of masculinity and gendered expectations within the military.

The second tattoo Grey associates with their trans identity is on the inside of their bicep. The design is a large (7”x 5”) trans symbol, which is a circle that combines the traditional symbols for male (an arrow coming out of the top right) and female (a plus sign coming out of the bottom of the circle), with an additional arrow and line coming out of the top left. It also features the date Grey started HRT. It is interesting to note that James also has the date he started HRT tattooed on his body and that this is a common occurrence that will be further discussed in other themes.

Grey explains the difficult process of choosing the tattoo, and how it relates to their trans identity:

This is the thing. I always wanted LGBT equality, I was very much going to get the equal sign everybody gets. I wanted something and then I was like, that's not enough, the marriage equality wasn't enough. And then I was trying to think of something else and then I was going to get the non-binary flag, but that doesn't show up on my skin. I saw the trans sign and I didn't want it too...this one is a little bit different, it's not like the typical [symbol]. I looked at transgender tattoo ideas on Tumblr and everyone has this, or the TPOC [trans person of colour] sign and it's the trans symbol with the fist in the middle and I saw that and I wanted that sign and I just wanted it to be designed a little different because it's my direction [physically in their direction] and I don't need other people to know that or understand it or whatever. And I got it like in May because it didn't take until I was like 2-3 months on [HRT] to where I was certain that this is what I wanted to do but because I started on [YouTube], as a non-binary person I was confused like, I didn't know if I was trans enough to be on T, I didn't know if I was trans enough to do anything. And I went back and forth with the idea...I think I'm male, I check with myself like five times a day like what gender would I describe myself as now and I did that for a month and it turned out that 70% of the time I was male. So I did this whole mathematical problem that caused me a lot of stress. And then, I started [HRT] and I still wasn't sure and it wasn't till May that I was sure. So that's when I got it.

(P. 7.15)

This tattoo marks a consolidation of their trans male identity: it is the result of many months of uncertainty and reflection, marking the point at which Grey's identity truly took shape as a trans person. Grey explained that they have plans for more trans-related tattoos in the future. They stated that the arm which has the trans symbol on it will be their "LGBT trans equality" side. Their other arm will be about their accomplishments, inspirations, and their life journey. Grey says, "There is

going to be something that commemorates top surgery and my name change...and I always wanted to get “they/their” pronouns because those are the pronouns I use” (9.23; 10.2) Grey is writing themselves into language through this tattoo, and also making a place for themselves in a system that has traditionally excluded them. It is a way of staking a very visible, visual claim to their trans and non-binary identity. These different aspects of their life will be memorialized on their arms in order to show their accomplishments and their journey through their identity.

While these two tattoos are deeply embedded within their trans identity, Grey states that all of their tattoos give them courage now, and have been monumental in reminding them of the confidence they had to have to start HRT. This was a hard decision for them as they identify as non-binary, but also trans. Not feeling “trans enough” in the community made them doubt their own identity. This tattoo was both a reminder and catalyzer of this courage. These tattoos help them remember the confidence it took to live their life, as an out trans person. This concept will be further explored in section 3.3, where tattoos are explored as therapeutic.

Logan, a 19-year-old African American trans man from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, relates his only tattoo to his trans identity. At age 14, he designed the tattoo he wanted to get. The original design consisted of a large heart, flames around the top, and a dagger through the middle. Over the years, Logan has added to the design order to improve it, and when he felt he was ready, at 16 he finally had it tattooed professionally. The aspect of permanence is very important for Logan when he relates his tattoo (and future tattoos) to his trans identity: “people who do decide to transition, it’s going to be, for most people, a permanent thing you know? You’re going to have to continue taking testosterone, more than likely, so those tattoos and transitioning are something that is a long time thing” (p. 10.12). In relating HRT to tattoos, he touches on the permanence in the act of transitioning and in tattoos themselves. While testosterone must be administered on an

ongoing basis, the tattoo is only applied once and lasts forever. Unlike the ever-shifting effects of testosterone, the effects of a tattoo are constant. Logan states, even if someone were to de-transition⁴, they would still have the memories of their transition, and that is permanent in itself. Both the tattoo and transition mark lifelong commitments and, indeed, permanent body projects. The concept of tattoos as permanence for Logan, and many others in this research, will be further explored in section 3.2.

Logan relates his tattoo to his past and the hard times he had growing up. Here is his explanation on how and why he decided on this specific design, and what it means to him:

Whenever I was growing up, things were always really hard going through life...but things were honestly like really rough because like depression, anxiety, and it was really hard for me to cope when I was younger. So I wanted a tattoo that represents that, even though I may always, not necessarily always, but a lot of times feel that the battle doesn't have to stop necessarily. That I can continue on and continue to fight even with what was going on at the time and so, basically, the heart represents my life, and the sword and the flames represent all the struggle, but you know even with all of that, the heart still remains, it's still stays, it doesn't just give up and so that's what it meant to me. (Logan p. 3.27)

As he explains it, Logan felt this tattoo represented his life and struggle, and later states that being trans is part of this struggle. Logan described his plans of adding two aspects to his tattoo in order to better embrace and visualize his trans identity. He plans on adding the date he started HRT, as well as the phrase "this battle is worn". Once again, like James and Grey, Logan will add the date he started HRT. This particular phrasing implies the battle he has gone through is embodied and worn in his skin, which cannot be removed, much like tattoos. It is very important that this tattoo

⁴ To stop transitioning and go back to how you were before you transitioned (some people stop hormones, have reversal surgeries, and/or change their names/gender markers back to what they were originally)

remain trans-related as he states: “It’s a trans tattoo and I want it to stay that way” (Logan p. 3.15). He does not want this tattoo to be discrete or pass as something else, unlike the previous participant, James, who does not want his tattoo to “out” him. For Logan, his tattoo and trans identity are inseparable, as he views his transition as a major life event that shaped him into the person he is today, and the tattoo reflects both the significance and permanence of that experience. In the future, he plans on getting more tattoos that are related to his trans identity, more specifically, a colourful design with a quote he holds dear to his heart: “I plan on getting a Harvey Milk quote across my chest. It’s basically ‘if a bullet shall enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door’, and it’s going to have a bullet shooting across my chest exploding into water colour going down my arm” (Logan p. 5.7). Here, inscribing the skin with his personalized message is equated with inscribing the world with his identity. Both are projects aimed at disclosure and revelation. This powerful imagery will be a reminder to keep going and be proud of who he is, and his identity. Although Logan only has one tattoo, his future tattoos will also revolve around expressing his trans identity, as a reminder to be strong and unashamed of who he is. Again, Grey and Logan both use tattoos as a symbol to not only help them realize their identity, but to also accept it.

Eddie is a 23-year-old white trans man from Oakland, CA who has eight tattoos. Though he believes there is a strong connection with his tattoos and trans identity, he also thinks that might not be the case for all trans people, “I mean not for everyone I guess, it’s just what the meaning is to that person. What a certain tattoo can mean to them” (Eddie p. 4.19) For him, his trans identity is depicted on the tattoo on his spine, which says “taking back what’s mine one step at a time”, and represents the journey he has gone through in his life, and especially in his transition. This tattoo reclaims the meaning of his body, which in turn reclaims the meaning of his life. More on the concept of tattoos as reclaiming one's body will be explored in section 4.5.

In the future, Eddie plans on getting more trans-related tattoos to help him remember the courage it took to go on this journey. He stated that after the interview, he was going to get a tattoo on his finger that says “I Am Enough”. This is to remind him that he is good enough and trans enough, as that is something he had been struggling with for years. He has other plans for trans-related tattoos but has not decided on what to get. Some of his ideas include getting the pronouns “he/him”, the trans symbol, and a sleeve covered in lace fabric in the trans colours (light pink, light blue, and white). For some of these participants, such as Eddie and James, these tattoos may be a way to “prove” their trans identity (to themselves and others) and as a way of guaranteeing group membership.

Shane, a 32-year-old Hispanic and Mayan Native living in North Carolina, USA, explains that his trans identity is not yet related to or embedded within his tattoos. He is placed in this section because of his plans for upcoming tattoos related to his transition and the deep rooted meaning they have across multiple aspects in his life. Shane has seven “pieces” (i.e., tattoos) that represent many different parts and events from his past. He states that his transition is still presently happening and is not a phenomenon of the past, and that he still has many steps to take in his life before committing to a tattoo about this part of his identity. Shane relates transitioning not only in trans identity terms, but also to his life in general. Since there are many aspects of his life he feels he needs to work on, his tattoo will wait until the right moment:

I’m still transitioning as a person and it hasn’t been until, I’d say the past couple of years where I really got centered in my spirituality and my personhood. And my manhood is really starting to evolve so I’m still evolving as a person and I don’t think it’s right to kind of get a permanent marker on that journey just yet because I’m not done. But when I get there, it certainly will come in its time. (Shane p. 4.5)

Shane has discussed his plan for his trans identity and life spirituality tattoo; he plans on relating it to other aspects of identity in his life that have shaped who he is just as much as transitioning has. Here he explains what he is thinking of as a representation of his journey:

My buddy has a really cool tattoo that he did, which was a cartoon syringe in his first injection spot. So he'll always know where his first shot was and it's a really cool reminder and I'm thinking I really like that idea of "this is where it started, it started with a shot". And I think I could translate it in other ways like in the military "one shot one kill" so like, one shot one kill literally, it killed who I was before... The person that I was before still hadn't died. So I think I'll get that when I feel I'm fully evolved into who I'm going to be because there's a lot of stuff that's... there's a lot of baggage, and I have to take care of that so when I feel that that has happened, I'll probably get it. (Shane p. 4.7)

Here, his friend tattooed the exact location on his leg where his first injection was. Shane is not planning on getting this specific tattoo, but makes a note of it as something he might want to do in the future. As argued by Amodeo (2015), Shane is not doing this transformation alone, his friend has a tattoo related to his trans identity and Shane wants to build on this idea for himself.

Once again, the theme of tattooing HRT dates recurs. James, Grey, Logan, and Shane either have the date they started HRT, are planning on incorporating it into their tattoos, or are adding a new piece altogether. It appears that within their transition, they each hold significant value to the date they started hormones. The process of memorializing this specific moment in time is a significant finding when comparing it with research discussed in the literature review. Contrary to what my data reveals, many academics argue that passing is viewed as one of the most important and significant moments a trans man may go through. There are many different reasons for this. One example, discussed by Namaste (2000) is that trans men are at risk of danger and bashings if "their gender is not easily identifiable" (p. 144). Therefore, not passing as male could result in

some unwanted attention. If it is ‘discovered’ that the individual is trans, they may suffer from physical abuse, emotional abuse, and a failure of identity (Schrock et al. 2009:703; Snorton 2009:82). Therefore, we can understand the emphasis on memorializing and placing importance on passing. However, my data show the emphasis is placed on a date that usually occurs before an individual may pass as male in society, the date they started HRT.⁵

When looking back at Shane’s plan for a tattoo related to his transition and HRT date, it is clear that the tattoo he plans on getting is an origin story; that is, a way of telling the story of his origin or “birth” as a trans man on and across a surface that is visible to others. It tells the story of his transition and how he overcame many things in his life. Shane is also waiting until he feels as though he has completely “changed skins” before getting a tattoo related to his trans identity. The new tattoo will be part of living in his new skin, or second skin. As Prosser (1998) argues, this second skin is the layer under the surface of the skin, and removing the surface layer frees the individual from being “surrounded by ‘false skin’” (p. 68). The individual’s true self is signified by the second skin. Once Shane feels he is ready to get a piece related to his trans identity, this will signify that his surface layer has been removed and his second skin will be free, and he and his body will be ready to be tattooed. In this instance, the self is seen as a project, forever being molded by the individual, and something that is never fixed (Tremblay 2011)

The military played a very large role in his life and the development of his identity. Shane served while Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) was in place, and at the time, had to keep his then lesbian identity a secret. Two of his military-era tattoos are of note in this regard. He has a Playboy bunny tattoo, and says he got this tattoo because it is cute and acceptable for ‘girls’ to have a

⁵ It is important to note that some trans people are able to pass as male without HRT and that not all trans people are able to pass as male with HRT.

Playboy bunny tattooed, but the true meaning for him was his love of women. Serving under DADT, he was not able to express his sexuality and therefore, getting this tattoo helped him reclaim some of his identity and allowed him to be both public and private about his desire for women. This concept of “reclaiming one’s identity” will be discussed in section 4.5. The second tattoo worth mentioning is one on his back. The meaning of the tattoo itself is not relevant to his trans identity, but the story of him receiving the tattoo is worth mentioning. While in the military, Shane only confided in a few individuals about his sexuality. The day he got his back tattoo, he was in a hotel room with a fellow soldier who had brought his tattoo machine with him. While he was being tattooed, Shane confided in his friend and explained his life situation to him. His friend accepted him and never told a soul of Shane’s secret. Shane felt there was a bond created between him and his friend in that hotel room that could never be explained. His friend is no longer with him, but Shane plans on getting a memorial piece dedicated to him because of his loyalty, friendship, and companionship. Although Shane’s pieces have yet to be connected to his trans identity, he is planning on getting a piece that represents his life and transition later on when he feels he has finished evolving in this aspect of his life. Interestingly, neither Shane nor Grey mentioned the link to joining/being in the military and the hyper masculine norms that are usually associated with it.

3.1.2 Indirect link to Transition and Trans Identity

This next section will explore the five transgender men in this research who believe there is either no link between their trans identity and their tattoos, or that there is an indirect connection through different meanings and interpretations. These tattoos were not tattooed on these individuals’ bodies

because they are trans, but instead, they are able to relate the tattoos they already have (or plan on getting) as something indirectly related to their trans identity.

Steve is a 30-year-old Caucasian trans man from Quebec, Canada who believes there is an indirect, albeit strong, connection between his tattoos and trans identity. He has 12 tattoos, which he got before he started his transition. He does not associate his personal transition and trans identity with one specific tattoo, instead he states that his identity comes out through all of his tattoos. An example of this would be Steve's first tattoo, a Chinese symbol on his stomach which he got at age 16. He wanted to show his "bad ass" side and felt that a tattoo on his stomach would be more masculine since "you always see tough guys in movies having them" (Steve p. 4.5) This was a way of allowing him to embody more masculinity through the branding of a symbol associated with it, into his skin. He states that having multiple tattoos and showing them off was a way to toughen himself up. When he looks back at his tattoos now, he uses the phrase "that was the little boy inside me screaming" many times. He feels as though his identity and the person who he was meant to be (who he is now), was trying to express itself in any way it could, and the only available outlet was through tattoos. Steve also has two sparrows on his chest, which he said made him feel more masculine and made his pectoral muscles look bigger. This points to the skin's remarkable capacity to embody and inscribe gendered meaning when it is felt that the body does not do so adequately.

When asked if he thought there was a connection between trans identity and tattoos, Steve stated:

I think if you look in the trans community, there's a lot of people who have body modifications and I think...it's a way of expressing yourself, changing your body in a way that you can naturally do. So yeah, I think like if you get a lot of tattoos and are trans it's a way of saying what I can change,

what I can express, what I can do with my body that my body can't do naturally like transitioning.

(P. 4.21)

In this aspect, Steve relates being able to shape his own body in any way he wants through body modifications - tattoos specifically - to fit an image he has of himself, and compares it to transitioning and how every trans person is different and transitions in a different way - some people choose hormones and surgery, some choose only one or neither. This is also a way of trying to make the inside visible on the outside, and exerting some measure of control over the body's form.

In the future, Steve plans on getting a tattoo that is more directly related to his trans identity. He plans on getting lyrics from an *Against Me!* song (I do not have permission to share this quote), that mentions fighting for what you want. Steve identifies strongly with the quote and states: "it still makes me go like wow because that's what I did, I fought for what I wanted and so I'm hoping to get this under my top surgery scars once they're healed" (p. 5.3). This tattoo is even related to his trans identity on a physical level, where he would purposefully get it under his top surgery scars to commemorate this step in his journey and remind himself of what he did to get to where he is now. Also, just as importantly, the tattoos allow him to cover reminders of his once 'female' body with signifiers of his now 'male' body. Illustrating what Tremblay (2011) and Honneth (1996) argue that identity as a fixed concept is impossible.

JJ is a 23-year-old white trans man from upstate New York, USA. He has two tattoos and believes his second tattoo is indirectly related to his transition and trans identity. This tattoo is located on his arm and is a quote from the Harry Potter series: "Expecto Patronum". The meaning of this word is significant for this research, and will be explained by author, J.K. Rowling:

The Patronus is the most famous defensive charm. The aim is to produce a silvery-white guardian or protector, which takes the form of an animal... As a pure, protective magical concentration of happiness and hope it is the only spell effective against Dementors [bad spirits]. The majority of witches and wizards are unable to produce Patronuses and to do so is generally considered a mark of superior magical ability. (Pottermore)

The reason this specific phrase is tattooed on JJ is because he repeats it to himself when things in his life are hard or go in a different direction than he had planned. This is indirectly related to his trans identity as he states that transition is not always easy, and having something he can visualize, gives him strength to keep moving helped him: “transition isn’t always the most fun thing in the world sometimes, so I think that even in general it helped me a lot to have the tattoo and have the little mantra to say...it helped me a lot like during the more difficult parts of transition” (JJ p. 6.5). As we can see, JJ uses this phrasing for all aspects of his life. He did not get this tattoo because he is trans, nor does he depend on his trans identity to inform his tattoo, but he is able to indirectly relate it to different facets of his life, transition included.

In the future, JJ plans on getting more tattoos and wants to subtly incorporate a trans meaning in the background. Once again, this is indirectly linked to his transition as the tattoo he is planning on getting is related to his life, and being trans is just one aspect of his identity. His future plan is a chest piece with two specific tarot cards that he always gets when a friend or professional gives him a reading. All the cards he would get would be related to transition in some form, even when the person did not know he was trans. This helped him reaffirm his trans identity and made his experience feel valid. Therefore, he would like to tattoo the cards on himself, to commemorate that experience. Looking down at his chest, he will be able to remember his trans identity, as it shines through in his tattoos.

George is 21-year-old trans man who lives in Quebec, Canada, and he describes his ethnic background as German and Vietnamese. He has two tattoos; the first one is a four-leaf-clover on his buttocks, and the second is a quote from his favourite song, located on his shoulder/collar bone. The second tattoo is relevant to this project as George indirectly relates the quote to his transition and trans identity. This piece is indirectly related as George did not get the quote tattoo because he is trans. Instead, he chose this tattoo because to him, it represented his entire life, which includes being trans, though that is only one facet of his life. In other words, George does not need a tattoo that is a constant reminder of this one aspect of his life. He much prefers to focus on his life as a whole. George states, “It’s a significant part of my life and I wanted it on me forever so I choose to have it. I think it was the best way to remind myself from where I was to where I am now...” (p. 3.2). In this quote, he is explaining the meaning of the quote and the reason he needed it tattooed on his body permanently. Unfortunately, I do not have permission to describe the quote in detail, but the song refers to something in life not going according to plan. This is how George feels about his life; there are many things that have happened throughout that have been different and not the ‘typical’ narrative, and his transition and trans identity are a part of that, but not the main aspect. As he puts it, “It represents all of my life, not just being trans” (George p. 3.4). In this case, the tattoo is mobilised in order to remind him and others that he is more than just trans. When asked if he believes there is a connection with tattoos and trans identity:

I think it’s true, I think there’s a connection...it’s permanent. When you transition, it’s permanent, it’s something that’s always going to be a part of you. It’s not representative of who I am, but it also is. Like don’t judge me by my tattoos but don’t judge me either because I’m trans. Like I think that’s something that connects. (George p. 6.11,13)

Finally, George explains that he might want to get a trans-related tattoo in the future that commemorates his transition and trans identity, but would only pursue this once he feels his transition is complete. This can be linked to Shane only wanting a tattoo related to his trans identity when he feels he is ready. Once George and Shane's surface skin (or false skin) is removed, both of them will be free. In both of their cases, it will be when they feel their transitions are completed. Once their transitions are complete, their second skin will appear and they will potentially be ready for a tattoo related to their transitions.

Andrew is a 22-year-old Native American trans man from Los Angeles, California, USA. He has six tattoos and does not believe there is a connection between his tattoos and his trans identity. However, when asked about some of his tattoos, he began to make indirect links to his transition. An example would be his last tattoo, an illustration of a sheep with his interpretation of it being "unfollow the herd". Andrew has always felt that he does things in his life in a way that is different than the majority, and he does not care what others think of him. This is why this tattoo is very important to him; he feels it represents him and his life. When asked if he relates this tattoo to his trans identity, Andrew states:

Not like crazy directly... maybe I wouldn't be as "I'm going to do whatever the hell I want" like maybe I wouldn't be at that point [if he were not trans]. And definitely the one on my chest I'd say it kind of has hints of, you know, different things I wished for myself or the way that I viewed myself or a relationship that I wanted. So I'd say that some have hints of my transition and my identity that aren't based like 'I'm trans'... But like I am. (P. 5.15)

Although Andrew acknowledges there may be an indirect connection with his tattoos and his trans identity, he does not need to be reminded that he is trans with a tattoo. He says it is part of his identity but states, "I don't feel like I need it on me" (Andrew p. 6.1). Tattoos are important to

Andrew as they mark different events in his life and allow him to express himself. At 17, he built his own tattoo machine and decided to give himself four tattoos. He has since then removed all four, and replaced/redone one professionally. He says they were “super shitty” but it was the experience of building his own tattoo machine and being able to produce his own art on his body that mattered. He had dreamed of tattoos since he was a young child, and building this machine and doing his own tattoos was a way to express himself. This can also be symbolically connected to building your own body and doing gender your own way.

Alex is a 23-year-old white transgender man from Columbia, Missouri who has two tattoos: a breast cancer ribbon with the word “hope” above it, and a quote that says “got me last”. He got his first tattoo at age 18 because he felt like he wanted to do something big in his life, and getting a tattoo was a big event for him. His first tattoo, the breast cancer ribbon with the word “hope” above it, is for his mom, who beat breast cancer when he was younger. To him, this tattoo was a symbol of pride and love towards his mom. The other tattoo is related to his late grandfather. He had a very close relationship and connection with him that he wanted to remember forever. The words “got me last” are from a game they played often when he was little. When asked if any of these tattoos are related to his trans identity, Alex states “I didn’t get them because I was trans... they’re not related to that” (p. 3.8). For him, his tattoos are more related to individuals in his life who have influenced him and how those memories are extremely important to him. He does not need a constant reminder that he is trans as he says it is not the aspect of his identity that defines him: “It’s not my entire identity, like I’m more than a trans person. I’m a guy, I’m a student, I’m a son, I’m a friend, It’s just not something that I try to focus on basically” (Alex p. 5.10). Like George, Alex does not want to be reduced to his transition. Tattoos are about expressing yourself and being/becoming more authentic, which for him means honoring his whole life through his

tattoos. Transition is just one meaningful part of who is is. When asked what his stance was one getting more tattoos in the future, he said:

I would definitely like to get more tattoos and continue to just become more authentic and be myself and not care about what other people say or whatever. So for me, it was just more of like, being authentic, which relates a lot to being trans and being open and transitioning. (Alex p. 3.10)

Although he does not directly connect his tattoos to his trans identity, because of his views on getting tattoos and transitioning as becoming his most authentic self, his tattoos suggest an indirect connection to his trans identity.

Tattoos, in relation to trans identities, are often an outward expression of the internal struggle trans people face. For most participants, this was discussed as the choice to transition (medically) while for others, it was expressed as feelings of inadequacy (not “trans enough”). As I have shown, all participants note that their transitions were factors in their lives, though the degree of significance varies.

3.2 Tattoos as...Permanence

This theme will explore tattoos as permanent. Most participants brought up the concept of tattoos being permanent, and many of them related this to their trans identity and how transition is a permanent aspect of someone’s life. Tattoos tend to be linked to a person’s self-perception, self-expression, and individuality (Ferreira 2014:306; DeMello 1995:41; Dickson et al. 2015:108; Johnson 2006:47; Schildkrout 2004:319). While tattoos are permanent body modifications, transition can also lead to generally permanent modifications from surgery and irreversible HRT-related physical changes. Most participants discussed the impact that permanence had on their

choice of designing and getting a tattoo. The connection between their transition as permanent and tattoos as permanent was one of the more suggestive findings of this study.

3.2.1 Permanence and Trans Identity

As mentioned in the previous discussion, “tattoos as connection to trans identity”, George related his tattoos to his trans identity based on the permanence of both: “when you transition, it’s permanent. It’s something that’s always going to be a part of you” (p. 6.13). When a trans person realizes they are transgender, many decide that transitioning is the best way to feel comfortable in their bodies. Certain aspects of transition are permanent. Some trans individuals choose to go on HRT, which leads to some irreversible and permanent effects. This can also be said about Gender Affirming Surgeries, previously known as Gender Reassignment Surgery or Sex Reassignment Surgery, where there are also many aspects which are irreversible and permanent. The idea of transitioning and tattoos as permanent is further explored by Logan, who states:

People who do decide to transition - it’s going to be, for most people, a permanent thing you know? You’re going to have to continue taking testosterone, more than likely, so those tattooed and transitioning are something that are a long time thing. It’s a thing that stays with you even if you do decide to de-transition, you know? All the memories, they stick, so you know, you’re going to be reminded regardless what you do, so it’s going to stay no matter what. (P. 10.12)

For Logan, it is the experience of transitioning alone that will stay with someone forever. Whether someone decides to proceed with transition, or if they change their mind and de-transition, the memories and experiences are lifelong. The concept of permanence of transition, regardless of where in transition an individual is, is extremely related to tattoos as being permanent. The concept

of transitioning and modifying/ creating one's own bodies based on their internal concept, is brought up by James who states:

[Tattoos are] permanent reminders, honestly, and the fact that you can create it into whatever way you want it to look or how big you want it, where you want it, completely customized...you can make it exactly what you want it to be... in that sense then, it's kind of like our transitions, we make it exactly like we want it to be and get to be the people we truly feel we are. (P. 6.5)

For him, the importance is placed on how tattoos are customizable in every way, in terms of design, shape, size, colour, placement, artist, location; these decisions are all up to the individual. Similarly, individuals who are transitioning know what they need to do to their bodies and make transition-related decisions accordingly. There is much choice and variability in the transition process. Individuals decide if they wish to start HRT, and can stop at any time, can choose whether they have all recommended surgeries or just one or two, choose surgical methods when applicable, be open about their trans identity or stealth (not letting others know of their trans status), or deciding on whether they wish to change their legal documents to reflect a different name and gender marker (passports, birth certificates, licenses). The element of choice in transition is mirrored by the customization found in tattoo design; decisions are made based on the individual's desire for their body to look a certain way. These two concepts, tattoos and transition as permanent and customizable, are interrelated. Aligning the self and identity comes together with these tattoos.

3.2.2 Permanent Reminder

This next section will explore the participants who relate their tattoos as permanent reminders to either lived experiences, or individuals in their lives who have passed away. As mentioned above,

James deeply relates to the permanence of tattoos and transitioning. He is also very passionate about the idea of his tattoos as a reminder of moments in life:

I like the fact that they're a reminder of something that you went through in your life because I mean, that's why the majority of us go and get the tattoo, it's because we've gone through something or we want to remember something we've gone through. (James p. 6.5)

This concept is further explored by Grey, who explains the reason they got their first tattoo:

I think my first tattoo, I got because I wanted something permanent to remember this part of my life... I wanted to celebrate [finishing basic training], I wanted to always remind myself that I did this, that I did something that most people couldn't. (P. 5.3)

Grey used their first tattoo as a tool of empowerment. They wanted to remember the effort, drive, hardship, pain, suffering, and validation of finishing basic training. This was something major for them as they were the first person in their family to join the military. They wanted something to demonstrate their pride and bravery when it came to serving their country. This is a feeling they never wanted to forget, and the best way to remember these moments in their life, was to permanently ink them on themselves:

I think it's great that it's permanent. It's always there as a reminder to me of a time in my life. Whether it was good or bad. Because I enlisted during Don't Ask Don't Tell which was like ...very scary and it's still a reminder that even though I knew I was going in under this, that would potentially get me a dishonourable discharge. My want to serve this country was so great, I took the chance anyways and it reminds me of that loyalty I have to my country and the fear...and that with all the tattoos that I have, it reminds me of [that] confidence. (Grey p. 5.5)

Tattoos as reminders are not only associated with important moments in someone's life for these participants; tattoos are also used as tools to remember loved ones who have passed away. Alex was very close to his grandfather, and when he passed away, Alex always knew he wanted to get

a tattoo to commemorate the relationship they had. As mentioned in the previous theme, his tattoo reads “got me last”, as it was a game they played when he was younger. Alex states: “I didn’t want to forget him and what he meant to my life” (p. 2.21). This tattoo is a constant reminder of the relationship he had with his grandfather and Alex loves the fact that, because it is now permanently inscribed on his body, the memories they shared will be with him forever. Tattoos are, therefore, not just reminders but also forms of memorialisation. Although this tattoo is not related or associated with his trans identity, the tattoo is still relevant to the scope of the research as it demonstrates the roles memorializing plays in his life and it speaks to the way tattoos communicate. As discussed in the literature review, Johnson (2006) argues that tattoos are a form of resistance against the unstable and impermanent society we live in (p. 47). Perhaps the individuals who choose memorial tattoos do so to resist the notion that life is not permanent and that death is real. By keeping a piece of the person with them, through their tattoo, it is a reminder of old memories in order to keep the memory alive. Once again, not addressing the fact that death is real and permanent.

The aspect of constant reminders is also brought up by George, who explains the reason why he wanted tattoos:

I think I wanted [a tattoo] because it’s permanent. It’s a choice that you made that’s permanent. It’s a good thing to remind you of stuff because it’s always there, you’re always there, whatever you do, it’s not just like a picture and you can lose it, it’s there forever. (P. 5.21)

These individuals believe their tattoos, as permanence, act as a tool to remembering different aspects of their lives, whether it be moments they never want to forget, moments of achievement, or to remember the ones they love who have passed away. Once an individual tattoos a specific memory, it is as if the memory becomes a part of that person because tattoos are permanent and

never disappear. It is as if one were to press a pause button on a specific memory when they tattoo it to their body. It is now and forever a part of them, which makes them a powerful form of memorialization. Steve explains how tattoos evolve with an individual over time: “It will age with you and eventually fade, if you put on weight [it will] stretch. They age with you, you can sometimes tell in old tattoos so they become you in a way” (p. 6.19). Tattoos then are seen as a necessity for some individuals in remembering some aspect of their lives, experiences, achievements, and the ones they love.

3.2.3 Impermanent

The last participant worth mentioning within this theme is Andrew. He was the only participant out of all who did not believe tattoos were permanent or that permanence and transition were connected. The reason for this was because he had four of his tattoos removed. As mentioned in the previous theme, Andrew built himself a tattoo machine when he was in high school. He had always been fascinated by tattoos and was impatient to wait until he was 18. One night, he looked online and decided to build his own machine and ended up giving himself four “bad” tattoos. He was extremely happy at first, but over time began to feel embarrassed by the designs, and decided to have them all removed. He has plans to re-do many of these tattoos professionally. However, because he had tattoos removed, he does not believe in the concept of tattoos as permanent. If he decides one day that he no longer wants a specific tattoo, he will remove it. This is very similar to how JJ sees tattoos and permanence as well. He does believe tattoos are permanent and can be linked to one’s trans identity being permanent, however, he states “yes tattoos are permanent, but you have options”. The concept of permanence of tattoos was brought up often by his parents when

he was younger and wanted tattoos. It was only with much convincing and letting his parents choose the design that he was able to finally get his first tattoo.

The concept of tattoos as permanence is very important in the lives of these transgender men. Many see a strong link between transitioning being permanent (even if one decides to de-transition, the experiences they had while they were transitioning will always be with them), and having tattoos which are permanent. Another aspect which is important to examine, is that many of the participants put a lot of weight on tattoos as a permanent reminder of many aspects of their lives, whether it was to remind themselves of their identity, adversities they have overcome, or to remember the people they love who have passed away. Tattoos embody particular moments of the life course thereby making them, and the skin on which they appear, important sites of mental, physical, and social memorialisation.

3.3 Tattoos as...Therapeutic

The third theme that arose from this research is individuals using tattoos as a therapeutic tool. These individuals used tattoos to help themselves cope with different challenges in their lives. Some participants used them as a source of strength in times of hardship, while others need a reminder that they can overcome their struggles and be brave. The physical pain of receiving a tattoo also arose as a therapeutic coping mechanism. Two individuals explained the necessity, for them, of feeling the pain of getting a tattoo.

3.3.1 "It Helps Me Cope"

Tattoos are therapeutic for multiple reasons. The following individuals describe how their tattoos help them cope with various hardships in their life. In the first theme, in relation to trans identity,

JJ discussed why his tattoos, which are not directly trans-related, can be indirectly related to his trans identity. As I have already mentioned, the tattoo reads “Expecto Patronum” and JJ uses this as a mantra to get through difficult times in his life. An important part of his story is how he came to think of this tattoo, he states:

I was taking a positive psychology class, before I even came out I think, and we had to find a popular press article about counselling, which is hard to do, it had to be related to counselling positive psychology and something that we are interested in, which made it almost impossible. And I came across an article, it was about this older counsellor that had younger clients and she was trying to find a way to relate what was going on in their lives to something they were interested in and the whole thing was about *Harry Potter* and she asked one of her clients “what would Harry Potter do in that situation” and the girl was like “he would cast a patronus charm” ...so the whole thing was about using your patronus, it was very cute. It was the main idea. So that’s why I started with that one...I knew I wanted a Harry Potter tattoo and I didn’t know what I wanted until I read that article. (JJ p. 4.3)

JJ decided on this specific *Harry Potter* tattoo to start his *Harry Potter*-themed tattoo sleeve because he had gone through, and was going through, some very hard times in his life, and the act of imagining himself “casting” his own patronus, helped him cope with whatever life had thrown at him. He is transforming his body from a source of pain or vulnerability, to a source of strength. This imaginary force helped him become more confident and re-evaluate his situation and work to improve it, and move on. He states:

I think it kind of became a personal mantra for everything, and whenever things weren’t going the way I wanted or in a particularly nice way, that’s what I would say to myself...it helped me a lot like during the more difficult parts of transition...But saying *Expecto Patronum* to myself is kind of like “ok you need to rephrase whatever is happening because it’s not helping you” doing a little

CBT in my head haha, that's pretty much what it ends up being...that has helped me more than anything else. (JJ p. 6.3)

He says that friends in the past have tried to help him through his problems, but they were never able to understand him on a level he needed. The only thing that has ever helped him enough, has been saying his mantra, "Expecto Patronum". It seems as though JJ's tattoo and future plans (tarot cards) link him and his life to an almost supernatural journey. It is as if using these tattoos helped/helps him escape the realities of the hardships he is going through, and instead is able to imagine this fantasy where things are better. Using this fantasy helps him cope with real life events. Whenever something in his life happens that he is not prepared for, or he does not agree with, he looks down at his arm and is able to feel some relief knowing that he will be able to re-evaluate what is happening and continue on, as he has done hundreds of times before and after getting this tattoo.

This notion is also brought up by James, but instead of re-evaluating what is going on his life to come up with a more positive interpretation, he views it as an extra push. James appreciates that he is able to see his tattoos every day and states: "I see it every day and I glance at it throughout the day and give myself that little extra push" (p. 2.9). James went through a lot of bullying when he was younger, and having these tattoos empowers him to keep moving and not dwell on the past:

It's just a constant reminder to just believe in myself which I had a lot of issues with growing up, I went through a lot of bullying through high school and elementary school so it was just that constant reminder of just do what you need to do, don't worry about what anybody else wants. (P. 2.15)

The tattoo he is specifically referencing is the one on his back which reads "believe". He states: "It reminds me of the struggles that I've gone through" which pushes him to look forward instead of backward. James is able to move on and cope from these events in his past which caused him a

great deal of distress, and remember to stay positive. The body then becomes empowering rather than disempowering. Alex uses the method of getting tattoos to cope as well. However, instead of coping with past events, Alex focuses on the hardships that are ongoing in his life right now. When looking down at the tattoos he has, he can bring himself back and remember he is better than he was before.

Logan also went through very difficult times when he was younger, and the tattoo he has represents the drive he has to keep going, but also commemorates what he has lived through. When he was younger, Logan dealt with severe anxiety and depression. He was able to get through this with the help of friends, but still wanted to memorialize how he overcame tough times, by getting a tattoo. As mentioned in section 4.1, Logan felt as though his battle has not stopped, and that it is an ongoing fight throughout his life. His tattoos, a heart with flames and a dagger going through it, reminds him that even with all that the heart goes through, it still stands. The significance of this tattoo is even more ingrained within his identity as it was something he started to design when he was 14. At 16, with the permission of his mother, he was able to get it tattooed. Refining and adding different parts of the tattoo in those two years was crucial for him, as he was slowly starting to feel better and wanted to commemorate his strength. This tattoo empowers him to remember that no matter what happens in his life, or how many horrible things occur, he - as the heart does - will still survive and be stronger than ever. He states: “but just knowing that it was there was enough to make me really happy” (Logan p. 7.7).

Physically being able to look down and having a positive affirmation/reminder is important to many of my participants. Grey and George both relate their tattoos as a method of remembering their past hardships and how they got through them. Grey states: “[the visibility of the trans symbol tattoo] was important to me...I think that that’s really important to me when I have bad days. I like

to look at it and [know that] I'm better than I was nine months ago" (p. 6.9). Nine months prior, Grey had not begun the process of transitioning and was still unsure of their identity. It took them months to accept who they are. Having a tattoo that is a physical reminder of the strength to begin transitioning, helps them through their current difficulties and serves as a reminder that their life has improved since. These tattoos become a way of psychologically charting or tracking one's personal transformation. George has a very similar view where he believes his tattoos are a significant part of his life. He says, "I think it was the best way to remind myself from where I was to where I am now" (George p. 3.2). His tattoos are not directly related to his trans identity, as we saw in theme one, but he does mention that he had a hard time growing up and his tattoo reminds him of everything he overcame in order to be who he is today and live as the person he was meant to be.

3.3.2 Physical Pain of Tattoos

For two participants, the physical pain of getting tattoos was extremely therapeutic for them, in different ways. Shane embraces the pain, and believes it lets out old energies and brings in new ones. This can be linked to the skin's primary function as a boundary between the inside and outside. Shane is mobilizing that idea indirectly by seeing the act of being tattooed as letting bad energies out and letting new ones in. He also attributes the pain to the memory of getting his tattoo. For him, his second and third pieces were extremely important as they remind him of a friend in his unit that passed away. Shane explains his views on tattoos being therapeutic:

The other thing that we don't talk about is the pain and I think that the pain is kind of letting the old energy and letting in new energy and also remember some of the pain and why we got where we got and that was very much so for the second and third piece. The third piece was all about pain. Because you don't get something on your spine [laughs] unless there is something you want to

remember. The cool thing about my second and third is one of my best friends in my unit was a tattoo artist...they were done very privately in a hotel between me and him and we were having a conversation and he was really keen on having a conversation while he was tattooing and it was very emotional. Telling him my story and coming out to him and trusting that I was going to be safe with him. And unfortunately he isn't with me today, but you know, he's very important and that he kept my secret...and I will always have it and those kinds of things are really cool when somebody passes. (P. 6.3)

Shane embraces the pain of tattoos and likes to remember the process, especially when it relates to his good memories for him. His experience in the hotel room was emotional for him, but the release of his emotions happened at the same time as old energy was leaving his body, and new energy was entering. This is a spiritual process for Shane as he had never come out or talked about his sexuality before in fear of being discharged from the military. The tattoo acted as a way for him to open up and trust someone, but also allowed the physical pain of the tattoo to become a spiritual experience. Looking at his tattoos now, he states: "they reminded me that the pain was there and I just have to make it through again" (Shane p. 6.7). In this aspect, he is referring to getting other tattoos and being able to deal with the pain again, and to persevere in the future. These tattoos remind him that if he could go through that level of pain voluntarily, he will be able to handle whatever else life throws at him.

The second participant who discussed the physical pain of getting tattoos as being therapeutic is Steve. He explains that the physical sensation of getting tattoos is something completely different, because he is able to control where the tattoo will go, and if he needs to stop. Steve went through some hard times and had a hard time accepting his trans identity. However, being able to control the pain he was in, and seeing something he created come out of it, was extremely therapeutic and healing for him. He states:

I always found something very therapeutic in getting a tattoo, like even though you're in pain. I don't know, you're in a space in your head where you just enjoying the ride. You can always say stop to the tattoo artist but that would probably suck having a half-finished tattoo but it's just like a ride because you're sitting there you're strapped in and you can't do anything but let yourself go. (Steve p. 4.23)

Being able to "let yourself go" was something very important to him. In the future, he plans on getting more tattoos, and these experiences will be even more healing as he embraces the pain and feels its therapeutic effects. This physical pain reminds these individuals that they can get through anything that is tough in their lives. However, having a visual reminder of that pain process is also therapeutic as it will trigger memories of getting that tattoo, and remind the individual that no matter what happens in their life, they were able to sit down for hours and deal with the pain. The pain in turn helps them integrate this into their current life situation and its many complex hardships.

The concept of tattoos being therapeutic is important to these participants. Almost all of them related their tattoos to previous hardships they have had in their lives, but have also been able to process and live through. Having these permanent reminders helps them with their current life situations. They are able to process what is happening and remember that they have not only gone through extreme things in their lives, but have survived them. For some participants, the idea of pain was therapeutic and very important as the physical pain of getting a tattoo, where letting go of old energy and letting in new energy is very spiritual, as well as having a visual reminder of the pain one went through in order to get this tattoo. All of these methods have helped these individuals cope with hardships in their life and have helped them be more prepared for the future.⁶

⁶ This therapeutic feeling of release when there is pain can also be related to self-harm. This is something that was not explored in this research as it is beyond the scope of this paper.

3.4 Tattoos as...Storytelling

The fourth theme will explore tattoos as a form of storytelling. The majority of participants use tattoos as a way to express their personal narratives, and to commemorate their life experiences. These tattoos act as a map of their past, and are used to retrace what the individual has gone through in their life. These tattoos also act as a way of telling less personal stories, such as storybook narratives, while still connecting to the individual on a personal level. They are turning a fictional story into a meaningful, non-fiction interpretation of their reality and using the skin to do so as the primary material.

3.4.1 Telling a Story

This section will explore the participants who discussed storytelling in regard to their current and possibly future tattoos. Shane, who was discussed earlier, has many “pieces” commemorating different moments in his life such as being disowned by his family, losing friends in the military, hiding his then lesbian identity, and in the future, adding a piece about his trans identity and the struggles he lived through related to it. He believes tattoos are a way for him to tell his story, by demonstrating both where he has been and what he has been through. When discussing others who also have tattoos, Shane states:

Folks that have tattoos and ink are storytellers. This is the culture that knows the difference between Japanese style and American traditional and all that. They’re storytellers because every one of their pieces has a story, not just why they got it, but where they got it from, where they got it, what was important about it, and it’s also a piece of who they are, and we are literally wearing our lives on our sleeves. Like our hearts on our sleeve. (P. 5.3)

For Shane, wearing his life on his skin is meaningful in telling his stories. Which has become part of a culture, that is, trans culture. He uses the skins primary function as a boundary to let people

on the outside access his stories and meanings on the inside. He also states that it is important to know the history of tattoos and the different styles. He believes that only people who know the difference between the different styles of tattooing are able to call themselves “inked.” For him, this distinction is extremely important as he explains that it separates him from the crowd of younger individuals getting tattoos without, what he considers, concrete reasons and stories attaching importance to their tattoos. Shane takes time in thinking about his pieces, and was only inked after years of careful consideration. Here, he explains the process he goes through in order to choose a new piece and what that means to him:

When we [Shane and his wife] move from one place to another, we get a tattoo from the place we left. So I [had] been in Houston for eight years and I had become really comfortable because I usually move every two to three years, and I was afraid of moving because I had stayed there the longest and I didn't know what it was going to be like. So I got that [piece] to remember to be brave and I was going to Nevada so there's a lot of things to be scared of. And two years later I left Nevada and I am completely in love with this tattoo.... (Shane p. 7.7)

Here, Shane is describing the “tattoo journey” he and his wife are on together. Each time they move, a new piece is added to their collections. The piece he is referring to here says “Lucky”, in regard to leaving Nevada. “Lucky” is a nickname given to him as he has experienced many things he should not have survived. To him, this piece tells many different stories: the story of his military experience and the luck he had to survive while he was in it, and his life and all the different hardships he went through in order to be where he is today. Shane also plans on getting more pieces in the future to showcase important aspects in his life, and illustrate the story of his life. His future tattoos include something related to transition (discussed previously), as well as a piece to commemorate his best friend dying in the military.

Another participant who sees tattoos as stories and storytelling is Steve. When asked what he liked the most about tattoos, Steve stated:

That there's a story, that it's something colorful. I'm always impressed by some artist and the work they do but I think that the sense of community, not necessarily trans, but you know, all the tattooed kids out there, they kind of have the same passion for that. (P. 5.12)

When looking back at previous themes, we see that tattoos are very important in Steve's life, and the way he sees his tattoos now is different than the way he did when he originally got them: before transitioning, before even knowing that he was trans. He stated that these tattoos were somehow his trans identity coming through before he even knew he was trans: "that was the little boy inside me screaming to get out" (Steve p. 4.5). His tattoos show the story of his life and his struggle to accept his trans identity. His first tattoo was located (purposefully) on his stomach because he believed that was a more masculine area to get tattooed. His latest tattoo was a cover-up of flowers, his "last attempt at accepting [himself] as a woman" (Steve p. 2.5). Although these tattoos show a tragic story - a story of struggle and inability to accept one's self, Steve grew from these tattoos and now is able to make different interpretations of them related to his current circumstances. He now believes getting all of these tattoos was a way to toughen up. One of his favourite aspects of tattoos is the individuality that comes with them, and the story they tell. For him, tattoos are a good conversation starter, especially amongst other tattooed people, but they also express his strength and individuality because he underwent the tattoo process. In the future, Steve plans on getting tattoos that tell a story related to his childhood and video games. Video games were always a big part of his life, and permanently placing this on his body is important to him and the story he is trying to portray about himself.

Another participant who is planning to get a tattoo representing his childhood is George. In the future, he plans on getting a large tattoo telling the story of his childhood. He says he did not have a bad childhood, which he states is a common assumption when individuals find out he is trans. Instead, he had a great childhood, and getting this tattoo would tell the story of “keeping the child inside alive.” This aspect is important to him because he believes all of his tattoos have deep meanings from different parts of in his life. When asked what he associates tattoos with, George states: “[I] associate getting tattoos with a story. It can be a nice story, or your life story, maybe you were just too drunk and had a tattoo or maybe it’s just significant” (p. 6.7). Unlike Shane, George does not believe one needs to have an emotional reason behind their tattoo, or know the history in order to be considered “tattooed” or “inked”. For him, getting a tattoo because you were too drunk, because your friend wanted to try out their new tattoo machine, or because of a very deep story embedded in your life, all of these reasons are valid. When asked why he liked tattoos, George said:

I just think people can relate to tattoos so any kind of people can get a tattoo. If you have a story to tell, or something to remind yourself, I think a tattoo is a good way to have that so I think it’s a special thing for trans people because there’s a lot of things to remember and to come from your past, so I think it’s a good way to have that with you forever. (P. 12.3)

When relating tattoos to his and other people’s transitions, it is clear that being able to remember aspects of their past is extremely important because it is a reminder of where the individual came from and how they became their present selves. This is similar to how Steve views his tattoos, and how the tattoos he got before transition all point to one direction: they show his life and story of slowly realizing who he is.

For George, it is important to understand that he is “telling a story for [himself]” through his tattoos. This is one of the main reasons why he does not see a problem with individuals getting tattoos simply because they just wanted one, without a specific reason. To him, no one needs to know the detailed story behind each tattoo. He states: “I don’t want it to tell a story for other people. I want to choose to tell that story if they see that tattoo; it doesn’t tell the story” (George p. 8.3). In this way, George is able to be selective and only choose to let certain people know the reasons behind his tattoos. Even then, as he states, the exact story will never fully be understood by someone else, as it is his story, and not theirs. Therefore, tattoos tell stories, but how they do so is different for each individual. This can be connected to a previous participant, James, who wants to get tattoos to cover up his top surgery scars. He is not ashamed of his past, however, he wants to have control over who he tells his story to.

Eddie is a participant who also believes tattoos are stories that can be interpreted differently based on the person. When asked what he likes the most about tattoos, he states: “It’s kind of like a life story...because no matter what happens on a person’s body, whether it’s meaningful or it looks cool, it represents a piece of that person” (Eddie p. 3.13). For Eddie, what matters is how the person with the tattoo interprets and sees their own tattoos. There is a reason why someone would get a tattoo and it is significant only to that person. Eddie also states that tattoos are “a way of journaling your life on your body. It’s like with each addition; it’s adding a segment of my life” (3.15). Something akin with Freeman (1993) and rewriting the self, Eddie is recreating his narrative, rewriting his story, and giving us the narrative he wants us to understand.

Another piece of his story is added each time he gets a new tattoo. Eddie has many little symbols tattooed and when asked what they all meant, he stated:

They all represent a person but they also kind of don't. It's more like, my mental state because I have Dissociative Identity Disorder so it's kind of like that first [tattoo] it's all of us making an effort to live together, and it's important. It's kind of like a representation of us trying to work together and making things good I guess. (P. 3.11)

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder is:

A disorder that is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct and complex identities or personality states each of which becomes dominant and controls behavior from time to time to the exclusion of the others and results from disruption in the integrated functions of consciousness, memory, and identity. (Merriam-Webster)

Explaining this definition helps to understand the complexities of DID and why someone who lives with this disorder would want to permanently get tattoos of all of their identities in order to try to make them “work together” and “live together”. Having DID does not stop Eddie from living his life and he chooses to not hide that part of himself from the world. This is an example of how a tattoo might look a certain way and be interpreted differently from the meaning given to it by the person who gets it. Only Eddie, who has these specific tattoos, knows and understands them on a deeper level.

Grey shares a similar view to George and Eddie, regarding the way tattoos can tell different stories to different people. They give the example of their Icarus tattoo:

I like how everything has a story and you may look at it and you may not know the story, like with you and my Icarus tattoo. Like even if you knew the story. There's two ways to look at it. Maybe not everyone will look at it in the way I do and I like that it tells a story and tells a little about my personality. (Grey p. 6.11)

When Grey says “like with you and my Icarus tattoo,” this refers to when they told me about their tattoo and asked if I knew the story. I was slightly aware of the story but when they told me their

interpretation, it was completely different. This is what they love about tattoos; that they can mean something completely different to someone else based on an interpretation related to their life experiences. Grey explains that the Greek myth of Icarus was that Icarus had wings made out of wax, and his father warned him not to fly too close to the sun or his wings would melt and he would fall into the water and drown. One day, Icarus wanted to see how close he could get before the wings would start to melt, but he went too close and was not able to save himself before his wings melted off. Simply put, this story is about knowing your limits and not burning yourself out. This is not the interpretation Grey has of this story, in relation to their tattoo. For Grey, this story is about pushing yourself as far as you can go until you cannot go anymore. They talk about Michael Jordan playing basketball and how instead of retiring when he was on top, he kept playing until he was falling behind because he was getting older and tired, and could no longer play. This concept is important for Grey because it pushes them further than they could dream of by not being afraid of their “wax wings melting off”. They relate this to their transition, and how if they had not had the courage to just “do it” without knowing the outcome, they would still be living a life they were unhappy with. Not knowing how an event will play out, and instead just going full speed and pushing one’s self, is the reason why Grey has this tattoo. The tattoo is about moving beyond rather than staying with one’s limits. Something that is necessary if one hopes to be able to transition. Therefore, storytelling often means a type of rewriting of one’s life into a narrative they identify with.

Tattoos as storytelling has been a crucial aspect in the tattoo decision making process and the reasoning why tattoos are important to these participants. Andrew explains why this is important to him:

Little representations of where I have been, footsteps in my life that I can literally see. Like even it's something like...50 years from now, I can look at it and be like 'maybe I don't like it as much as I did', [but] I can still appreciate that when I was 18 I really fucking wanted that and I thought that was awesome and it meant this and that at some point like I could still appreciate why I wanted it in that moment. (P. 5.5)

There are many different aspects which are important in this quote. First of all, with his reference to "little representations" and "footsteps," we can see that for Andrew, physical representations of one's life story are significant. Being able to see where he has been, what he has done, and what he has been through helps him remember certain moments in his life. The second aspect of this quote that is worth mentioning is how his associations with the tattoos he has may change over time. He believes he will not regret making the the decisions to get his tattoos, because he knows that at one point in his life, he really wanted that specific tattoo and there was a reason because it related to his life story. This way, much like Shane and Steve, he is able to recount his life story through these tattoos. However, the most important aspect is that it is their chosen life story that is applied to their chosen body.

The concept of tattoos as storytelling is very important in the lives of the trans men in this research. Most participants stated, without any leading or prompting, that an aspect of tattoos they loved the most was that tattoos are a way to tell stories. Some individuals relate tattoos and storytelling to past events that have happened in their life, especially during their childhoods. Others believed that people who are inked can only be those who know the history and different styles of tattooing. What the majority agreed on, is that it does not matter what tattoo an individual has, why they have it, and what is the meaning behind it. What matters is the interpretation that person has related to their own tattoo. No one can understand the meanings the person attributes

to their own tattoos because they have not lived their lives. However, tattooing allows for very specific life stories to be told, inwardly chosen instead of externally imposed. These concepts are very important and cover a wide range of why tattoos as storytelling is crucial in understanding why these participants want and have tattoos.

3.5 Tattoos as...Reclamation

Although only two participants discussed the concept of tattoos as a way to reclaim one's identity and/or body, this theme is worth mentioning as it is relevant in understanding how these individuals experience their identity and how tattoos have helped shaped their identity as trans people. In this section, I discuss two key narratives provided by each participant. The first, "no one could ever take that away from me", is a quote from Shane, and his use of tattoos as a reminder to himself of his identity, whether it is his name or sexuality. No matter how many times people tried to take away those crucial aspects of him, he had them tattooed, and for him, that meant no one could take them away, as tattoos are permanent. The second quote, from Eddie, is "Taking back what's mine". This is in relation to the trauma he has had in the past. Eddie uses his tattoos as a way to reclaim aspects of his life which he believes he lost. Both of these participants reclaimed themselves and their identities differently through the use of their tattoos.

3.5.1 "No One Could Ever Take That Away From Me"

For Shane, many of his pieces were strategically planned out in order to reclaim aspects of his identity. His first piece (tattoo) is an armband with a letter and blue flames around it. This is his reasoning and explanation as to why this was his first tattoo:

I was disowned by my family and I had to kind of find my own identity and so I just had to remember that I am who I am and the letter is of course my name, and no one could ever take that away no matter how hard they tried to call me by my birth name...and the blue flames, as people try and take my identity away, there's still a fire inside me to let me do what I do and the blue flame is the brightest, hottest part of the fire. That's why I will never have a red flame on my body. (Shane p. 3.15)

What is important to take away from this is that Shane says “no one could take that away from me”. He is using his tattoo as an act of empowerment and reclamation. However, this is not the only tattoo related to his name and identity. Shane's third tattoo is also related to being disowned and reclaiming aspects of his identity through ink. Here, he explains why:

The third one [has] my last name because my father disowned me and again it was to remind me that you can't take my heritage away. So it's on my back, also to remind me of who fucked me over [laughs]. It's just one of those pieces, and it's literally behind me and I'm moving forward and I don't need them. Placement is very important to me. It was a very painful tattoo. I mean who in their right mind kicks their 16-year-old out? Where is he supposed to go? I was blessed that I already graduated high school, I had a job, but still, I was 16. (Shane p. 7.1)

The specific placement of this tattoos is also important and symbolic as it is behind him. He is literally walking away from the people who hurt him and tried to take his identity away, and at the same time, it is a reminder of who “stabbed” him in the back - to never look back and always move forward. Although this tattoo is not mentioned as being related to his trans identity, he did tattoo his name on his arm in order to remember that it is his preferred name, even when people would call him by his birth name. This is not strictly related to his trans identity, but it can be said that there is an indirect connection. Taking control and tattooing his body serves as a useful form of reclamation of self, body, and identity for Shane.

Shane has his first and last name tattooed on his body, and although he does not see his last name as it is on his back, his identity is deeply associated with his name and it is something he refuses to let someone take away. His family disowned him at a young age, and instead of feeling defeated, he made sure he would always be a part of his family's heritage, even if they did not want him in it. His heritage and name are extremely important to him and what constitutes him as a person. Shane's reclaiming of identity through tattoos is not solely based on his name; he also attributes it to his sexuality as well. As mentioned in previous themes, Shane was part of the military when Don't Ask Don't Tell was active. He was not able to express himself, and talk about his sexual orientation. This was a time before he transitioned and presented as female, and was attracted to women. During our interview, he never said if he identified as a lesbian or not during this time, but he did state that he was attracted to women and dated women, and that under Don't Ask Don't Tell, this was not allowed to be discussed. At this time, Shane got a Playboy bunny tattooed on him. When I asked if he was afraid that would have outed him as being attracted to women, he stated:

Back then, I was very much worried about my ink outing me, so there were women who had Playboy bunny tattoos and they were cute and whatever so it wasn't too weird for me to have one. So if it was ever seen it would have been "so cute" but it was very much about my sexuality and that they can't take that away from me. You remember that I served under Don't Ask Don't Tell, so I was at risk of getting discharged. But again this was "you can't take this away from me" you can try, you can tell me what I can't love, [or] who I love, but that's not reality, and again it reminded me that's not reality. (Shane p. 5.13)

Shane used this tattoo to hide in plain sight. Only he knew the meaning of this tattoo and having it helped him reminder who he was, no matter what. It was very clever of him to get something that was seen as "cute" for women to have (Playboy bunny), but has double meaning for him. He risked

being discharged, but having a reminder of his identity that he was not allowed to express or even talk about, was more important to him. This was a way for him to tell his story through his tattoos without being ‘outed’.

3.5.2 *“Take Back What’s Mine”*

This section explores a quote Eddie stated in his interview: “take back what’s mine” (p. 4.5). Not only did this phrasing come up multiple times during our interview, but he also has a tattoo on his spine that says “taking back what’s mine, one step at a time”. For Eddie, this tattoo is about reclaiming his body and his identity and being able to do whatever he wants with his body. This is his explanation of his

At the time, it was self-reclamation through tattoos and I’m trying to reclaim myself as a person and my body as my own...like to make myself what I will be. So that was my first step - ok this is me, this is mine, I can do what I want. And so it’s like, I guess it kind of let me down the path where this is my body, this is my experience my life, if I’m not happy with the state things are in, why not be allowed to change that, you know? (Eddie p. 4.5)

During our interview, I asked if this was related to his trans identity⁷, he stated:

It was more trauma related. I was having a very rough time, I was having a hard time with remembering stuff and that was my way of being my own person. So I wanted to get that but I also wanted it to be general enough to fit in my whole self and my whole identity and body so that it would be more than just my trauma you know? (Eddie p. 4.15)

The idea that this tattoo fits his whole life and not just the trauma he had gone through is important to discuss, as he is trying to reclaim his body and his identity. Later in the interview, he did mention

⁷ It is important to note that I did not continue questioning Eddie about past traumas as this is beyond the scope of this research.

an indirect connection with this tattoo and his trans identity. Being able to take control of your life and your body, in regards to transitioning, was important and crucial for him and related to reclaiming one's self through these tattoos.

The two quotes explored within this theme are important in understanding the reason why individuals would get tattoos in order to reclaim part of themselves, whether it be their identity, or their body. The quote mentioned by Shane, "no one could ever take that away from me" discusses his use of tattoos in order to remind himself of who he is and where he came from, as well as reclaiming his multiple identities. Whereas Eddie's quote "take back what's mine" emphasizes a reclamation of body and trauma-related aspects. Both of these quotes take on different roles in how individuals may reclaim part of themselves through tattoos, but it is important to note that through this difference, they are still able to have reminders of who they are.

3.6 Tattoos as...Tool of Visibility

The final theme in this section will look at tattoos as a tool of visibility. More specifically, it focuses on how tattoos act as a visible reminder of certain aspects of a person's life. The other aspect analysed in this section will explain how tattoos make certain individuals feel as though they exist, are physically visible, and are alive to others around them. The concept of tattoos as a tool of visibility is crucial as it explores the reasons why certain participants decided on getting tattoos that were physically visible to them, physically visible to others, and/or not physically visible to anyone, including themselves. Are visible tattoos important for these trans men? The section seeks to answer this question.

3.6.1 Visible Reminder

The first aspect of this theme is tattoos acting as a visible reminder. Some individuals have tattoos that are visible to only themselves, some have tattoos visible to others, and some have tattoos not visible by anyone, including themselves. Steve, who discussed getting multiple tattoos as a way to “toughen” himself up, discusses the reason why he chose to have tattoos which were visible to others:

Because to me, it’s like made me feel more like a rebel. Back home I was more the odd one having this many tattoos, but not so much a couple of years later because everyone has them. I’m pretty sure I was the first person in high school to ever get a tattoo so it was like “yeah, take that suckers. I’m not the nerd you think I am. (P. 3.4)

Steve used his tattoos as a way to prove that he was not a “nerd”, and instead was a rebel. Being the first person in his high school to have a tattoo gave him a different type of status. As he mentioned in the first theme, he decided to get a tattoo of a Chinese symbol on his stomach as he had seen “tough guys” in movies have tattoos there. One again, the role of culture is visible in the making of the self, or making of a trans identity. Although this tattoo was not visible to anyone or himself, unless he had his shirt off, later on, he did get tattoos in more visible places. However, the link between the reason why he got his first tattoo, to look tough to others who knew he had it, had the same purpose in his visible tattoos. People were able to physically see his tattoos and see that he is tough.

Being able to physically see one’s tattoos is extremely important to the next participant, Alex. He stated that, for him, if he does not physically see the tattoo, he does not remember that he has them:

I don't want to say that I forget about it, because I don't, I guess it's just I don't think about it as often, I don't have that constant reminder...which I think that's why I decided to put this one (other one) somewhere on my arm instead of elsewhere. (Alex p. 7.21)

For Alex, having a tattoo in a place that was not visible to himself or others was not ideal. As he stated, he did not forget about the tattoo, but he also was not able to see it and remind himself of the reasons he got this tattoo. He states that tattoos are a way to express himself, and having others see that is very important to him. The other aspect important to him regarding visible tattoos is that he, and others, are reminded that it is permanent. It is also a reminder that he went through a certain amount of pain in order to have this permanent piece of art on his body.

As mentioned above, Steve was very proud of his tattoos as they made him look more tough, Alex has a similar experience. He explains that having tattoos gives him a sense of pride, and having visible tattoos shows others that he is proud: "I think it's something that I'm proud of. I'm proud that I've come this far and if I get something that means a lot to me, I want other people to be able to see it too" (Alex p. 5.16). These visible tattoos act as a way of sharing his life and experiences with other people. This is why in the future, he plans on getting only visible tattoos. This way he is able to share stories and experiences with other people, but also demonstrate his individuality, express himself, and be proud of his tattoos, the stories related to them, and the pain endured in getting that tattoo. He is also excited about having top surgery as he will be able to take his shirt off, and all of his non-visible tattoos will become visible not only to himself, but to others around him. Finally, during our interview I asked him about the visibility of the tattoo on his bicep. He realized at that moment, that he had never thought about how this tattoo was only visible to him (unless he lifted his arm). This was interesting as Alex had previously stated that he liked his tattoos to be viewed by others, not only himself.

Another participant who places importance on visible tattoos was Andrew. During the interview, when asked what his favourite thing about tattoos was, he stated that he liked that he is able to see the tattoo on his thigh, and at that moment made an interesting realization:

Now that I think about it, I wanted the one on my thigh...I was like 'I want to see something' and that's the one I see the most often and it's kind of like oh, it reminds me that I have tattoos because a lot of them I don't see. (Andrew p. 3.19)

Here, Andrew realizes that he places most of his association with all of his other tattoos to his most visible one. He decided to get a tattoo on his thigh for the sole purpose of being able to physically see it. This is important to point out as others interviews for this research talk about different placements for tattoos and how it is important for others to be able to see it, whereas Andrew makes it clear that this tattoo was for him to see. This tattoo then turns into a reminder tool.

Andrew also mentions his need for more visible tattoos (visible to others). Many of his tattoos are not visible when he is wearing clothes, as they are all well-hidden. He wishes these tattoos were more visible, but at the time he got them, he was nervous about jobs as he lives in a conservative area. He states:

I would like enjoy to see it, I got it, I want to see it. I think for that reason, I think I was also hesitant about jobs like as much as it shouldn't matter at all, it does. Eventually when people tell you things you think about it so I think at some point I'm just going to go for it but it does pop up in my head but I don't think it would stop me from getting some visible. (Andrew p. 8.1)

However, he lives in an older conservative neighbourhood, and he fears visible tattoos might affect his jobs in the future. Nonetheless, Andrew still plans on getting more visible tattoos, because for him, being able to physically see them when he is wearing clothes, is important even if it can mean being socially defiant.

Another participant who was afraid that visible tattoos might affect his jobs in the future, is Logan. Logan only has one tattoo, on his back in a location he and others cannot see. When asked why he got it in a place that was not visible to himself, he realized he had never thought about that. For him, the most important thing was for the tattoo to be hidden from others. Logan does not regret the placement of his tattoo, but states that in the future, he is going to be “covered in tattoos” (p. 2.29), which implies his tattoos will be visible to himself and others, even when wearing clothes. However, he is still aware that jobs are hard to find if you have visible tattoos and states this as the main reason he does not have more visible tattoos at this moment: “I really wish I could get tattoos in other places, but they are literally so strict about that here, it’s ridiculous”. Logan has to regulate his body to conform to societal expectations in order to get a job. Tattoos here, could be interpreted as being part of a counter culture⁸.

Unlike Alex, Andrew, and Logan, James is content with his tattoos being only visible to himself. He deliberately got his tattoo in an area he knew he could easily hide. He states:

I think I like the fact that I can hide it if I want to because I mean my family is pretty religious in a sense, I like to be able to keep things at a distance as much as I like as my comfort level...plus I live in a pretty conservative elderly neighbourhood so I get a lot of looks just for having a tattoo. I like to be able to just hide it whenever I feel uncomfortable or anything like that plus the constant reminder of, I can just turn [my arm] and it’s just right there at all times. (James p. 3.5)

For James, the important aspect is not how others react or showing off parts of him to others through his tattoos. For him, it’s a reminder for himself. As mentioned in theme 3, tattoos as therapeutic, James uses this tattoo to help him get through hard times. He does not need to share

⁸ Counter culture refers to something that is interpreted as dangerous and something people are afraid of. Counter cultures are not subcultures. Subculture refers to a group within a much bigger cultural group which has similar, but varying interests and beliefs.

the entire story with others; what is important is his relationship to the tattoo. If people ask what the meaning of the tattoo is, he is able to gauge whether or not to tell the entire story. It gives him a sense of agency with respect to his body and his personal story. However, after he got the tattoo, he showed everyone he knew because he was excited. Once that initial excitement left, he was able to keep it to himself and be happy with it. He stated that in the future, he does plan on getting tattoos over his top surgery scars. This will make them visible to other people when he removes his shirt. However, for him this is important as he would like to live stealth in some areas of his life.

Much like James, George does not go into detail often about the meaning of his tattoo when others ask. He prefers to keep the meaning to himself and only tells the entire story to people he trusts. His reasoning is also because he is afraid others might judge his tattoo based on small imperfections. George states: “It’s perfect the way it is. I just don’t want people to judge the way I did it...I can see little imperfections...I think it’s beautiful but also something that could bother me” (p. 4.22). The aspect that could bother him is if people started pointing out the imperfections in his tattoo. However, his tattoo is located on his chest, where the only way to see it is if he takes his shirt off. This is something George likes as he does not want others to stare at his tattoo. I asked him if he would be comfortable taking his shirt off in front of people. He stated that he would do it, but it would make him feel more self-conscious about his tattoos because now the tattoo is more visible to him, and to others. During our interview, George mentioned that the most important reason he does not want his tattoo/future tattoos to be visible, as he states, is because “tattoos are pretty personal and I want to keep it that way” (p. 11.3). His tattoos represent his individual self and his life, and this is something he does not want to share with others. This could be seen as a “private reality”, which demonstrates how personal and significant these tattoos are to him.

3.6.2 *Feeling Visible*

The final aspect in this theme that is worth mentioning is tattoos as a tool of feeling visible. Although only one participant mentioned this, it is important to see that everyone else who was interviewed had similar answers when asked about tattoo visibility. Some liked that their tattoos were visible, others only wanted them to be visible to themselves. In contrast, when Eddie was asked the question, he discussed feeling as though they are seen more by people. He did not mean this only in a physical way, where tattoos make you stand out, but it is more about seeing the individual as who they are. Eddie states:

I feel like with each tattoo I'm attaching a piece of myself and I'm more visible. Like it sounds weird like not physically visible because obviously, I can't be invisible. But like who I am like the person... I don't know, it feels like a way to communicate almost. (P. 6.2)

This concept can be related to something Ahmed & Stacey (2001) discussed in the literature review regarding tattoos making individuals feel permanent: “[t]he attempt to ‘mark’ the surface of the body is also an attempt to make the body ‘permanent’ and individual” (p. 8). By tattooing the body, the individual is not only making themselves visible, but also permanent. They are permanently visible.

Others in this research, such as James, Alex, and Andrew, have mentioned being proud of their tattoos and their tattoos representing specific aspects in their life. For Eddie, each tattoo is a symbol of who he is. The more tattoos he gets, the more they feel like their true self is expressed properly. Eddie has many tattoos, one on his back that is not visible and many on his neck/chest area that are somewhat visible to other people. It is interesting that not once did Eddie mention the importance for himself to be able to see the tattoos, or for other people. For him, his physical tattoos translate into emotional visibility.

The concept of tattoos as a tool of visibility is important for many trans men in this research. While some participants embraced and strove for more visible tattoos, others would rather keep their tattoos to themselves. As explored in this theme, visible tattoos are important as they can be a reminder of moments in the person's life, or a way to demonstrate pride and toughness, or to simply show others parts of oneself. Others choose to keep their tattoos to themselves because they feel their tattoos are personal and should only be shared with people they trust. It is clear that the concept of visibility and having visible tattoos is important in the lives of these trans men.

Conclusion to Analysis

This analysis consisted of six themes extracted from interviews done with ten trans men who have tattoos. Each theme was a continuation of the phrase “Tattoos As...”, as these themes explored the different roles tattoos have in the lives of these men. The first theme, tattoos as relation to trans identity, was discussed in three sub-themes: direct relation to their tattoos and their trans identity, indirection relation to their trans identity, and no relation whatsoever to their trans identity. The second theme, tattoos as permanence, discussed the individuals who mentioned the fact that tattoos were permanent and what that meant to them. The third theme, tattoos as a therapeutic model, explored the participants who are able to use their tattoos as a way to help them through difficult times. This was more prevalent in the individuals with more visible tattoos as they were able to look down at them and feel a sense of relief based on their situation. The fourth theme, tattoos as storytelling, discussed how tattoos act as a way to share different stories and memories. The fifth theme, tattoos as reclamation, discusses the participants who felt as though getting tattoos was a way to reclaim their bodies. This was related to transitioning, trauma, and never letting anyone take aspects of your identity away. The final theme, tattoos as a tool of visibility, discussed the participants who used their visible tattoos as a reminder of different things in their lives. As this analysis demonstrated, tattoos have many different roles which are utilized by these trans men. Tattoos are a part of their lives and related to their identity, whether it is their trans identity, or not.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

4.1 Closing Remarks

This thesis explored the relationship between trans men, identity, and tattoos. More specifically, it set out to explore what roles these tattoos play in the lives of the ten trans men interviewed for this project. Previous research has been conducted at length on the embodiment of tattoos across cultures, but there is limited research which focuses on trans men, and more specifically, trans men with tattoos. In order to better understand this phenomenon, this research aimed to answer the following question: what role do tattoos play in the development and perception of masculinity, identity, and the self for transgender men? In order to answer this question, interviews were conducted with ten trans men (one of whom identifies as non-binary). Through my analysis of the data, I found that most of my participants have tattoos that are connected to their trans identity, whether it is a direct or indirect connection. Some of the tattoos were visibly related to the individual's transition, such as the trans symbol, or the date they started HRT. Whereas for others, it was indirectly connected because their tattoos related to their life as a whole, and being trans was just a small part of it. Some of these tattoos were done before the individual knew they were trans, or before they transitioned, and they only now attribute some trans-related meaning to it.

The data also indicated that tattoos can play multiple roles in the lives of these trans men. The themes extracted from the data were tattoos as: permanence; therapeutic; storytelling; reclamation; and visibility. More specifically, tattoos as permanence related to the participants who believe there is a connection between tattoos being permanent and transitioning being permanent. Tattoos as therapeutic was connected to individuals who got tattoos as a reminder to be strong and to continue through life. Many participants had gone through tough times, from

being kicked out and disowned by their family at 16, to dealing with depression, and looking down at these tattoos helped them remember the past, but also move beyond it. Tattoos as storytelling enabled these individuals to tell their stories through their tattoos. Whether it was trans-related or not, they were able to discuss stories and how those relate to their lives. An example would be Grey's tattoos of Icarus and their interpretation of it being different than the more common one told in society. Tattoos as reclamation was related to the two individuals, Shane and Eddie, who used tattoos in order to reclaim their bodies and lives. Shane reclaimed his family identity by getting his last name tattooed, and reclaimed his sexuality by getting a Playboy bunny tattooed (before his transition), which represented his love for women. Eddie reclaimed his body and the traumas he had been through, through his tattoos. Lastly, tattoos as visibility, where the physical aspect of feeling visible through tattoos, was discovered.

The themes found throughout the data analysis helped answer the research question: what role do tattoos play in the development and perception of masculinity, identity, and the self for transgender men? Trans men are able to relate to their bodies through their tattoos by relating them to their trans identity, telling their stories, and reclaiming their bodies. Masculinity and body image were not themes which were discussed by the participants. However, through my analysis, it is clear that identity and trans identity is deeply embedded in the tattoos of trans men.

This research and findings are important because trans men are an underrepresented population in society and in academic research. Many studies focus on lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, but rarely do we see research which focuses solely on trans men. The large gap in the literature is an indication that there needs to be more research done on topics related to trans men. When the ad was placed online, over 250 individuals responded in the first five days. This showed me that individuals in this community want to have their voices and stories heard. Many were very

happy that this research did not just focus on them being trans and their transition, but instead brought something else into it - tattoos. As discussed in the literature review, in today's society, tattoos and body modifications are often seen as important in individuals' identity. Therefore, combining these three concepts, trans men, identity, and tattoos, brings a new level of analysis and creates space for the voices of trans men to be heard. This not only adds to the little existing research surrounding trans men, but it also provides representation for trans men in academia and in society.

4.2 Limitations

Although this research was able to provide an answer to my research question, there were some unavoidable limitations which need to be addressed. First, I would like to state that I am a white, 26-year-old, somewhat cis-passing, queer, middle class, trans man living in Canada. I do not speak for the experiences of trans people of colour (TPOC). I did make it a point to include TPOC in at least half of my sample, however, I do not speak for their experiences. I transcribed all ten interviews verbatim, and added these quotes to the research. With all of my participants, I did my best not to speak over them or speak for them. I am simply providing a platform in the form of research for all of these voices to be heard. Yet, understanding that this research is coming from a white person is extremely important. Second, the sample size of this project was relatively small with ten participants. I would have liked to include more interviews, and I would not have had any issues accessing more participants, but because of the size limitation of this type of thesis, having a sample of ten was sufficient. Third, the interviews all relied on self-reported data. In this case, data collected from the interviews contained information and stories from the participants which could have a bias in terms of selective memory, where the individual remembers their experiences

or events differently than how they actually happened. Participants could also be exaggerating certain events and experiences. These factors are out of my control, but I have examined, analyzed, and quoted each individual's story as they were told to me. Fourth, my research question was not fully answered in terms of looking at how tattoos relate to an individual's masculinity. There are questions I did not think to ask related to masculinity until after all the interviews were completed. Lastly, a major limitation was the lack of research previously done on topics related to mine. The literature found was focused on the skin, on the significance of tattoos, and on trans identity, but there was nothing that I found at the time of my search which related to my topic. Therefore, my analysis section (chapter 3) mostly contained the data I collected and analyzed instead of incorporating multiple authors, themes, and concepts from existing research.

4.3 Recommendations for Future Research

There are three main recommendations I have for future research on this topic. However, there is one potential limitation for others that is hard to overlook - access to this community. Some individuals may have a difficult time accessing and gaining the trust of this community if they are not already members of the community. Regardless, my three recommendations include: more research done on trans men, research focusing on masculinity, tattoos, identity, and trans men, and research focusing on trans men who have tattoos that are directly related to their transition and visibly trans.

As mentioned previously, there is a large gap in the literature regarding research done on trans men. I would hope be that in the future, trans people, including trans men, are researched appropriately and included in research that discusses the "LGBT" population, instead of solely

focusing on the “LGB” part. Including trans men in research is crucial to advancing knowledge about the rights of trans people, and it also helps trans people feel represented.

As discussed in the limitations of this research section above, I missed the opportunity to discuss masculinity with my participants. Future research should explore the relationship between trans men, identity, transitioning, tattoos, and masculinity. Future research should also look at trans men who have trans-related tattoos. This research focused on trans men who have tattoos, not specifying if they are trans-related or not. However, one of the most interesting finds of this research was that almost all of my participants related their tattoos to their trans identity (indirectly and directly). According to my findings, tattoos and trans identity are significantly connected, and research focused solely on this topic would yield interesting results.

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APPENDIX I

TRANSGENDER/ TRANSSEXUAL MEN AND TATTOOS

PARTICIPATE IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

My name is Chase Ross and I am currently doing my Masters thesis at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. For this project, I will be looking at the role tattoos play in transgender men's identities. If you are interested in being interviewed for this project, please look at the criteria below:

- 18 and over
- Live in Canada or the United States
- Identify as a female to male transgender or transsexual person
- Have tattoos (these tattoos may or may not be trans related)
- Are willing to speak about the relationship between your tattoos and your trans identity
- Have access to Skype and are comfortable being interviewed about identity-related issues

If you believe you fit the criteria, please email me at chaserossresearch@gmail.com. If you would like to remain anonymous during email correspondence, please feel free to use pseudonyms or an anonymous email address.

APPENDIX II

Interview Guide

1. What name would you like to go by?
1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What is your sexual orientation?
4. Where do you live? You can be as specific as your city or mention your state/province. If you are worried about confidentiality, you can say “west coast”, “east coast”, or other geographical locations such as this
5. What is your ethnic background?
6. Have you begun your transition if so...? (If they mention hormones and surgery, ask how long)
7. How old were you when you first realized you were trans?
8. How long after that did you wait to tell people?
9. Once you told people, how long did it take you to start transition (via hormones and/or surgery, or social transition)?
10. How many tattoos do you have?
11. Why do you have tattoos?
12. Where on your body are they located?
13. Why are they located in these specific places?
14. How old were you when you got your first tattoo?
15. Why did you get this first tattoo?
16. Did you feel as though this tattoo represents you or something you were for?
17. What did you like about the idea of having a tattoo?
18. What do you associate tattoos with?
19. Do you feel as though you got this first tattoo because of your associations to it?
20. Do you associate getting your first tattoo with your transition?
21. The research clearly states that I’m looking at the connection between transgender identity and tattoos, what did you initially think when you saw this ad and decided to contact me?
22. Why did you contact me and want to take part in this research?
23. What do you believe is your personal connection between your transgender identity and your tattoos?
24. Do you have any transgender-related tattoos?
 - Why did you decide to get it (or them)?
 - Do you think it is obvious to others that this is a trans-related tattoo? Why? Why not?
 - Are you afraid that this tattoo will ever potentially out you?
25. Why don’t you have any trans-related tattoos?
26. What about tattoos do you like the most?
27. Can you describe the process and experience of getting the tattoo/tattoos?
 - How do you feel when you are getting a tattoo?
28. What do you think of piercings and other body modifications? Do you view it as the same as tattoos? If not, why are they different to you?

29. What is a body modification?
30. Modify documentary
31. Are you happy with all your current tattoos?
 - If no: Why not? Have you gotten them covered up/would you get them covered up?
32. Are you planning on getting more tattoos in the future?
33. What type of tattoos are you planning on getting?
34. Do you believe there is a difference between masculine and feminine tattoos? Why, why not?
35. Would you get a tattoo regardless of this 'masculine' or 'feminine' divide?