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I Can't Even Wear My Skin: The Experiences Visibly Tattooed Women Have for Rejecting Hegemonic Femininity

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Social & Behavioral Sciences 402-01

Senior Capstone Seminar II

Instructor: Professor Figueroa

Capstone Advisor: Dr. Amanda Pullum

I can't even wear my skin:

The experiences visibly tattooed women have for rejecting hegemonic femininity

By

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Social and Behavioral Sciences, Sociology

Abstract

This capstone project examines the ways in which visibly tattooed women experience negative interactions and behaviors for rejecting hegemonic femininity by being tattooed. The qualitative research conducted for this capstone involves semi-structured virtual interviews with 11 visibly tattooed women (ranging from 23-88+ tattoos). The purpose of this study is to highlight the negative experiences that come with being a visibly tattooed woman in a society that aims to control women's bodies and keep them in positions of submission. The research in this capstone finds that visibly tattooed women experience dehumanization through objectification, fetishization, stereotyping, and having their professional lives and boundaries disrespected. The research also finds that visibly tattooed women encounter ambivalent sexism for breaking traditional constructions of femininity and rejecting the feminine apologetic.

Introduction

Women's bodies have long been seen as vessels that can be controlled, oppressed, and dehumanized by the male gaze. This leads to a culture that desensitizes and normalizes the objectification of women. When tattoos are emblazoned on already objectified bodies, this objectification and dehumanization can deepen, as a tattooed female body becomes a symbol of bodily excess (Braunberger, 2000).

The objectification of tattooed women began to increase during the 19th century with the rising popularity of carnivals and freakshows, where tattooed women would present their tattooed bodies to the public (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Waxman, 2017). The appeal of heavily tattooed women (meaning a large percentage of their body is tattooed) began to surpass the shock of heavily tattooed men, titillating audiences by displaying themselves with minimal clothing and the stories of how they became tattooed (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Parry,

1971). The stories often involved “tattoo rape,” which consisted of the women being kidnapped and forcibly tattooed by “savages” (Braunberger, 2000). These narratives were popular and garnered more attention from audiences because they catered to those who supported colonialism and the genocide of indigenous people, as well as those who wanted to keep women in positions that deprive them of agency and bodily autonomy (Braunberger, 2000).

As time went on, tattooed women continued to be objectified. In the 1970s, tattoo conventions gained traction (Braunberger, 2000). At these conventions, tattoo contests were held where the female participants would walk across the stage in high heels and swimsuits to show off their art (Braunberger, 2000). Even among their tattooed peers, tattooed women were expected to follow gender norms and expectations to appease the audiences.

Now, spectators are still flocking to behold the spectacle that is a visibly tattooed woman, though these flocks gather on social media and in public rather than in carnival tents. With this attention comes admiration of their tattoos, but also a cornucopia of unsolicited and invasive interactions, that can lead to inappropriate conversation and even hostile harassment. Very few scholars have examined the experiences of being a heavily tattooed woman in a patriarchal society, and even fewer have brought attention to the harassment these women face. Through this capstone, I, as a tattooed researcher, intend to highlight the negative interactions and behaviors visibly tattooed women experience for rejecting traditional, hegemonic constructions of femininity by simply existing.

This study will also highlight how being a heavily and visibly tattooed woman in a patriarchal society is a balancing act. Getting tattooed is a way for women to have agency and bodily autonomy in a society that aims to control and oppress them. Tattoos also allow women to express their inner-selves, their appreciation for art, and commemorate special events or loved

ones. However, when a tattooed body is female, this agency can also be stripped away and have meanings placed on it by the patriarchal structures in which we exist. For example, in a patriarchal society a lower back tattoo symbolizes sexual openness, rather than what the woman wearing it may have originally intended. By having a visibly and heavily tattooed body, tattooed women are seen as breaking traditional norms of femininity, leading to them being emblazoned with various meanings and assumptions about their personal character and their lives. This ultimately leads to individuals, primarily men, enacting ambivalent sexist attitudes to attempt to revert these women back into positions of submission.

Through conducting semi-structured interviews with heavily tattooed women and giving them the opportunity to discuss the ways in which they have been harassed for being tattooed, this capstone project will answer the research question of: How do visibly tattooed women experience negative interactions and behaviors for breaking norms of femininity by being tattooed?

This capstone will first review previous literature, focusing on three prevalent themes: the stigmatization of tattooed individuals in general, tattooed women and gender norms, and the stereotypes and perceptions of tattooed women. I will then provide an in-depth discussion of the methodology I utilized to collect the data to answer my research question, then go on to present and analyze my findings, focusing on three main themes: dehumanization, benevolent sexism, and tattoos and gender norms. Lastly, I will discuss what my findings mean, how they connect back to the previous literature, and what the bigger picture is that readers will take away from my research. This capstone will conclude with how my research contributes to the field of social sciences and why it is significant to the general public, as well as recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Introduction

Literature on the topic of harassment experienced by visibly tattooed women is non-existent. However, there is a handful of existing literature that revolves around the perceptions of tattooed individuals in general and tattooed women specifically, as well as how women “do” tattoos while navigating the patriarchy. In this literature review, I first discuss feminist theory and how it has been applied in the existing literature, as well as how it applies to the topic of visibly tattooed women breaking traditional gender norms. I then discuss three additional themes: 1) the stigmatization of tattooed individuals in general, 2) tattooed women and gender norms, with an emphasis on how women balance tattoos and femininity, the rejection of the feminine apologetic, and the theory of ambivalent sexism, and 3) stereotypes and perceptions of tattooed women.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory aims to highlight the gender inequality found in and perpetuated by social systems, as well as the relationship between oppressive systems and our positions within hierarchies of power and privilege in which we exist (Carastathis, 2014; Shaw, 2014). Feminist theory views gender as a construct that imposes power relations throughout all contexts, such as conversations, social systems and institutions, and regulations that shape an individual’s experience within society (Carastathis, 2014; Shaw, 2014).

Every individual is expected to adhere to socially constructed gender roles. For women, the dominant discourses of femininity perpetuated by patriarchal structures regulate how they should behave and do gender (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Lawler, 2005). This is no different for tattooed women. From a feminist perspective, the way tattooed women decorate their bodies

feeds into the way in which women simultaneously conform to and resist against socially constructed ideals of femininity (Dann & Callaghan, 2019). Tattooed women resist socially constructed ideals of femininity by being tattooed, but conform to these ideals by getting tattoos that are more “appropriate” for women to have.

Many of the feminist theorists concerned with tattooed women view women getting tattoos as a way of subverting the patriarchy, challenging traditional hegemonic constructions of femininity, and reclaiming the body by liberating it from objectification and submission (DeMello, 2000; Mifflin, 1997). However, Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn (2004) found that many non-tattooed individuals, and even some tattooed men, view this as a transgression of gender norms. This threatens those in power who benefit from the gender binary and heteronormative gender norms and expectations. This threat to power may lead men in particular to enact sexist attitudes to keep visibly tattooed women in submissive positions and to justify their structural power.

Stigmatization of Tattooed Individuals

Despite tattoos gaining mainstream popularity within recent years, certain social stigmas and stereotypes are still associated with tattooed individuals, such as being less inhibited, less competent, less sociable, and more sexually promiscuous (Broussard & Harton, 2017; Martin & Dula, 2010). These negative stereotypes can often have real-life implications. For example, tattoo discrimination in the hiring process is legal in the United States and in Europe, reflecting the perceptions that tattooed individuals are unreliable, less competent, and are not suited for professional environments (Broussard & Harton, 2017).

According to both Broussard and Harton (2017) and Zestcott et al. (2017), people tend to express more negative attitudes towards tattooed individuals than non-tattooed individuals. This

can be attributed to the implicit negative attitudes that individuals have towards tattooed persons (Zestcott et al., 2017). These attitudes can then initiate negative stereotypes, which can extend to real-life, harmful treatment towards tattooed individuals (Tews et al., 2019). For example, the stereotype of tattooed individuals being more promiscuous may lead to people believing that a tattooed person is more open to sexual attention and willing to engage in the discussion of, or even participate in, sexual matters (Tews et al., 2019).

Negative stereotypes are still prevalent despite there being little to no evidence that tattooed individuals are different than those without tattoos (Broussard & Harton, 2017). These stereotypes cause people to generalize certain negative attributes to all tattooed individuals. This generalization can then lead people to behave a certain way towards those with tattoos, namely in ways that are stigmatizing or discriminatory, such as not hiring an individual strictly because of their tattoos, or calling a tattooed woman a “whore” based on the stereotype of being more sexually promiscuous (Broussard & Harton, 2017).

Tattooed women & gender norms

Tattooed women are often seen as flaunting their independence, breaking societal gender expectations and beauty standards, and rejecting the feminine apologetic, thereby threatening patriarchal structures that aim to control them (Hawkes et al., 2004; Leader, 2016; Santos, 2009). The feminine apologetic is the requirement that women balance masculine interests and traits with their femininity to be considered socially acceptable (Wade & Ferree, 2019). By still performing femininity in some capacity, women who engage in more “masculine” activities or have more “masculine” traits, are still seen as socially acceptable and are not perceived as being a threat to men and patriarchal structures (Wade & Ferree, 2019).

The act of getting tattooed and the tattoo industry itself are historically associated with masculinity (Atkinson, 2002); therefore, when women get tattoos, they may be perceived as encroaching on a male dominated activity and industry. This leads to women having to perform the feminine apologetic by choosing more “feminine” designs that have meaning, getting tattooed in easily concealable locations, and getting small tattoos in order to be socially acceptable (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007). When women have multiple tattoos in visible places, especially on the face, chest, hands, and neck, they are rejecting the feminine apologetic, which may lead to increased stigmatization for being seen as too masculine (Irwin, 2000; Santos, 2009).

Tattooed women with multiple large, visible tattoos in particular are seen as doing tattoos the “bad” way, making them targets for both hostile sexism and seemingly positive—yet still sexist—behavior (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Developed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske (1996), ambivalent sexism theory argues that sexism is a particular form of prejudice marked by deeply held conflicting feelings towards women that manifest into two categories: benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism is a set of attitudes towards women that idealize them in stereotypical, rigid gender roles (i.e. the housewife) and as love (and sexual) objects, but these attitudes are conveyed in a positive tone (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism, however, involves attitudes that develop from strong feelings of dislike based on incorrect, but strongly held generalizations (Allport, 1954; Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Tattooed women may experience both benevolent and hostile sexism. Ambivalent sexist individuals often categorize women based upon their acceptance or rejection of traditional power relationships and gender roles (Glick et al., 1997). Due to tattooed women being seen as disrupting traditional, hegemonic gender norms, especially heavily tattooed women (Broussard

& Harton, 2018; Hawkes et al., 2004), they may be more likely to encounter hostile sexist attitudes, such as being called a “whore.” However, because tattooed women are perceived as being more sexually promiscuous, they are often sexually objectified (Broussard & Harton, 2017; Guéguen, 2013; Leader, 2016; Swami & Furnham, 2007). This indicates that tattooed women experience benevolent sexism as well. Benevolent sexism experienced by tattooed women may be subtle in the way of a man complimenting a woman’s tattoos, but then taking the conversation to a sexually suggestive level, or it may be as blatant as a man openly fetishizing a woman’s tattooed body.

Stereotypes & perceptions of tattooed women

While scholars have found that tattooed women can be perceived as stronger and more independent than non-tattooed women (Broussard & Harton, 2017), they are also often highly stereotyped, hypersexualized, and objectified, often being labeled as whores, masculine, or deviant (Braunberger, 2000; Broussard & Harton, 2017; Santos, 2009). The breaking of gender expectations and traditional notions of femininity, as well as perceptions about tattooed women, makes them targets for several stereotypes (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; Hawkes et al., 2004; Irwin, 2000; Leader, 2016; Santos, 2009).

Perhaps the most significant stereotypes associated with tattooed women are that they are more sexually promiscuous and deviant (Guéguen, 2013; Leader, 2016; Swami & Furnham, 2007). In a field experiment, Guéguen (2013) found that men were more likely to approach a female confederate with a tattoo than a non-tattooed confederate. When asked the probability of going on a date and the probability that the woman would agree to sex on the first date, participants thought that they were more likely to go on a date and have sex on the first date with the tattooed confederate (Guéguen, 2013). These findings indicate that the stereotype of sexual

promiscuity attached to tattooed women is still prevalent and men anticipate that tattooed women act in a way congruent with this stereotype. This perception of increased sexual intent can lead to unwanted social interactions and sexual harassment, which has the potential to create serious, harmful implications for the women on the receiving end of this behavior.

The negative stereotypes associated with tattooed women are often not only an attack on being tattooed, but the intersection of their gender as well. Although men with tattoos experience stigmatization, tattooed women are often perceived more negatively and will be judged more harshly (Hawkes et al., 2004), leading to a double standard (Irwin, 2000; Leader, 2016; Santos, 2009). For example, lower back tattoos on women, and women only, are often referred to as “tramp stamps.” Individuals, typically men, perceive lower back tattoos as more sexual and the women wearing them as more promiscuous (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Leader, 2016), leading to the denigration of these women. The “tramp stamp” is a perfect example of the double standard that exists between tattooed men and women, as there are no derogatory terms for any tattoos on men’s bodies (Dann & Callaghan, 2019). These gendered attacks and the double standard reflect a significant problem within society, which is the sexist attitudes towards tattooed women, and women as a whole.

Conclusion

The existing literature provides insight into the perceptions others have of tattooed persons in general, as well as tattooed women. Based upon stereotypes and perceptions of tattooed individuals, such as deviancy, incompetency, and promiscuity, others tend to have more negative attitudes towards those with tattoos than those without. Visibly tattooed women in particular may experience more negative responses and evaluations due to them breaking rigid gender expectations and doing tattoos the “wrong” way, thereby rejecting the feminine

apologetic. This then threatens those who hold power within the hegemonic gender hierarchy. This threat to the dominant gender roles and norms, as well as patriarchal structures, then leads to these women encountering various forms of ambivalent sexism, such as being degraded down to a sexual object.

There is a notable gap in the literature reviewed that I will be addressing. Most of the previous studies have focused on others' perceptions of tattooed women (Armstrong, 1991; Guéguen, 2013; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007), as well as the cultural implications behind women getting tattooed and why they get tattoos (Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; Craighead, 2011; Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Leader, 2016; Mifflin, 1997; Santos, 2009). Very few studies (Atkinson, 2002; Mifflin, 1997; Santos, 2009) have focused on the first-hand experiences of tattooed women in general, let alone through qualitative methods. This work will expand upon previous literature by providing a qualitative study on the first-hand, personal experiences tattooed women have that stem from them rejecting hegemonic femininity.

Methodology

This qualitative research focuses on identifying how visibly tattooed women experience harassment for breaking hegemonic femininity by being tattooed. The criteria for the participants was to have at least one large tattoo that is visible to the public and have more than one thousand followers on a social media platform (i.e. Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok). I did not limit it to one social media platform because the sample that I was gathering data from had multiple social media accounts with significant followings. This research is also more concerned with the behaviors these women encounter rather than how frequent it is on certain platforms or if different platforms bolster a more toxic environment. I also did not limit my sample to the United States, so the participants could be from anywhere in the world since geographic location

was not relevant to my research. Most of my participants were recruited from social media through direct messaging, or email if they had it linked in their bio. Those who were not recruited through direct messaging/emailing were recruited through snowball sampling during the interviews.

I conducted 11 virtual, semi-structured interview with visibly tattooed women through Zoom for 30 minutes to an hour and a half to hear about the negative interactions they have experienced for being tattooed. The participants ranged from their mid-20s to mid-30s, and the majority of them were White (see Table 1 for descriptives of the 11 participants). My sample was not as racially diverse as I wanted; therefore the intersection of gender, race, and tattoos will not be addressed in my research. This does bring about the need for more intersectional research in the future to examine the experiences of heavily tattooed women of color, as the stigma of being a tattooed woman in addition to racism has the potential to make their experiences much different than most of the participants in my study.

All of the participants in my study were heavily tattooed, ranging from about 23 to over 88 tattoos (a few of the participants indicated that their entire body is essentially one big piece, making it difficult to count the exact number of tattoos). The largest amount of tattoos women had in previous studies was 17 (Armstrong, 1991); therefore, this is the first study that includes women who have a large percentage of their body tattooed (including face, neck, and hand tattoos). All of the participants also indicated that the majority of their tattoos are visible to the public eye, meaning they have tattoos on their hands, face, neck, and/or arms, legs, and/or chest if they were to wear short sleeves, shorts, skirts, dresses, or lower cut tops. To maintain confidentiality, I will be using pseudonyms throughout my analysis.

Table 1: Participant descriptives

Pseudonym	Self-reported age	Self-reported race/ethnicity	Self-reported number of tattoos
Luna	25	White	Most of her body is tattooed
Amy	26	White	50+
Lita	26	Latina	25+
Raye	25	White	48-50
Serena	30s	White	Most of her body is tattooed
Michelle	29	White	88
Mina	30	White/Hispanic	Entire body is essentially one big piece
Amara	25	Native American/White	Most of her body is covered
Trista	28	White	50+
Serenity	28	White	29+
Diana	Mid-20s	Chinese/Vietnamese	19-23

Results & Analysis

Once the interviews concluded, I analyzed my data by coding manually and organized the codes with Google Jamboard. The analysis of my data presented three significant themes: 1) dehumanization in the form of objectification, fetishization, stereotyping, and disrespect of professional lives and boundaries, 2) experiences with benevolent sexism, and 3) responses related to gender norms, specifically responses to tattooed women rejecting the feminine apologetic and the double standard that exists between tattooed women and men.

Dehumanization

Women in general are often dehumanized by the male gaze; however, when covered in tattoos, women become even more dehumanized. Most of the participants discussed experiencing dehumanizing behaviors for being visibly tattooed, primarily through objectification, fetishization, stereotyping, and not being respected in their professional lives. All of the participants talked about strangers approaching them in public (i.e. at grocery stores and the mall) and touching their tattoos without their consent, as well as asking various questions about their tattoos (often times without greeting them). Trista said: "...I have very visible tattoos and if they're very visible then that means [people] are very able to talk about it." Similarly, Diana said:

"Having tattoos opens the door for a weird conversation piece and people will definitely take advantage of it and try to slide into the DMs. When you see someone that marked their body forever, people are going to wonder why, they're going to want to talk about it, even though we don't want to fucking talk about it, and it's usually people who don't have tattoos."

Most of the time it is not someone's intention to objectify another person; however, when the focus is strictly on the tattoos rather than other aspects of the person's life, the person is then being boiled down to their tattoos and appearance, even though they are a regular person who is more than just their tattoos.

Sexual objectification & fetishization

Many of the participants discussed how they have experienced being sexually objectified and fetishized. At some point in time, and often multiple times, men have asked participants in my study if they are into pain or told, "You must be kinky." This reflects the perception that tattooed women are more promiscuous, engage in risky behaviors (Guéguen, 2013; Hawkes et

al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007), and enjoy pain because they are willing to sit through the painful process of getting tattooed. A majority of the participants have also had men ask how far down their tattoos go, or what other tattoos they have hidden underneath their clothes. Luna discussed a time she was waiting in line at a grocery store wearing a crop top, and an older man in front of her said, “Man, I’d really love to see how far those tattoos go down.” In that instance, she was seen as a sexual object rather than a human being who was just trying to buy groceries. Another participant, Serena, talked about men direct messaging her on Instagram and asking if she had any photos where she was not wearing as many clothes and they would frame it as, “they just want to see the rest of the art,” although it was clear that their intentions were to see her tattooed body nude.

Even if a small piece of a tattoo is showing, people will fixate on it and feel entitled to know what else is underneath a woman’s clothes, thereby objectifying her and diminishing her to just a tattooed body. Non-tattooed people, men in particular, perceive tattoos to be an open invitation for attention, despite all of my participants indicating that they get tattoos for themselves and not for other’s attention. People also perceive tattooed women to be more open, leading to them being approached and expected to be more accepting of attention, even when it is unsolicited attention at the grocery store.

The fetishization of tattooed women can be extremely explicit as well. For example, Michelle talked about responses she would get from men about her leg tattoos: “I’ve had dudes message me on Instagram and tell me they have jacked off to photos of my legs or send me dick pics through Snapchat telling me they’re going to have to whack it later to [my] legs.” Even though Michelle was posting pictures of her legs because she wanted to share the art on her body, men saw this as something sexual and used them to satisfy their fetish. Tattoos on female

bodies are perceived to be inherently explicit and sexual through the male gaze, leading some men to act in predatory ways.

Being stereotyped

All of the participants have experienced interactions where they were stereotyped based upon the perceptions of tattooed women, such as being seen as untrustworthy, unprofessional, kinky, and sexually promiscuous. Scholars have found that tattooed individuals are often perceived as untrustworthy and unprofessional (Broussard & Harton, 2017; Martin & Dula, 2010), and these stereotypes are reflected in interactions my participants recounted. When discussing how she felt stigmatized in person, Mina talked about her experiences going into stores:

“I have very visible tattoos, so I’ve literally had people follow me around Target. And in any store I go to with my husband, who’s also super heavily tattooed, we get super stigmatized. But being alone in stores, I mainly get people following me around thinking I’m going to steal.”

Lita, who works as a hair stylist, talked about how having tattoos deterred clients from going to her:

“...The fact that I had tattoos would deter people from wanting to see me regardless of having 10 years of experience in the hair industry just because I wasn’t professional to the image they think I should be.”

People often perceive those with tattoos as untrustworthy and unprofessional because in the past, tattoos were associated with criminals, gang/mob members, and prostitutes (Atkinson, 2002; Armstrong, 1991; Braunberger, 2000). This outdated, yet long held perception continues to affect

visibly tattooed individuals' lives and their ability to be taken seriously and trusted in professional settings, as well as in the general public.

As previously mentioned, many of the participants have experienced sexual objectification and fetishization which correlates with the perceptions that tattooed women are sexually promiscuous and into kinkier sex and will be stereotyped as such (Guéguen, 2013; Leader, 2016; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Serena talked about an experience she had in an antique store: "The older gentleman [behind the counter] got out the item I was looking at and he says, 'you might like the thing next to it. It's a collar. It could be a kinky collar.'" Trista also talked about having experiences influenced by these stereotypes:

"My job [as a sex worker] is a big factor, but also my tattoos. It promotes the idea that I'm really into risky sex, and people are always so surprised that I am married... People automatically assume that because I have an Only Fans, that I'm tattooed, and I have some nudity here and there, that means that I will have sex with them for \$100."

Women in general are often sexually objectified and fetishized by men, but in the case of tattooed women, this sexualization increases. Braunberger (2000) puts it best: "When a woman's body is a sex object, a tattooed woman's body is a lascivious sex object; when a woman's body is nature, a tattooed woman's body is primitive; when a woman's body is a spectacle, a tattooed woman's body is a show."

Disrespect of professional lives & boundaries

Another way eight of the 11 participants experienced being dehumanized is by not being respected by men in their respective careers. Serena used to use her social media to further her modeling career, but men began to take advantage of the situation and sexually harassed her:

“I purposely stopped tagging ‘#tattoos’ and ‘#tattoogirl.’ I did that to start because I was in Inked Magazine and was trying to get more modeling photos and being heavily tattooed, not everyone wants to publicize that. So, I was reaching out for my own career and advancement, but people were using those tags to hunt people down to be able to send them sexual messages.”

When the profession is more intimate in combination with a woman who has tattoos, people often cross personal and professional boundaries. Four of the participants are tattoo artists and all of them discussed times in which potential “clients” crossed a boundary and made them uncomfortable:

“I had this person write two capitalized submissions saying, ‘Hey there sexy. I want to hang out with you, but I also want this tattoo.’ They were laying out what they want their tattoo to be, and at the end they were like, ‘but I also really want to be friends and I want to look into your eyes’” (Diana).

Another participant discussed how she began to capitalize on people constantly asking about her tattoos through her work as a sex worker:

“...I don’t want to sit down and have a conversation with a random guy who wants to know all about tattoos and my stories, then I get messages being like, ‘Why aren’t you responding to me? Why aren’t you telling me about it?’ People get angry when I don’t want to deep dive into the story of my tattoos. So I started making an Only Fans tattoo tour video because I get asked every single day about my tattoos and if you really want to know and you want to know the stories, then you can pay me. But then people get mad at me and say, ‘How dare you put this behind a paywall? I’m allowed to know what your tattoos mean’” (Trista).

People feel entitled to know all about another person's (especially women's) tattoos because it is something that is permanent and very visible. This leads to people dehumanizing them and crossing personal boundaries. In Trista's case, the men who wanted to know all about her tattoos were frustrated that she was profiting off of something they felt entitled to. This led to aggravated backlash and it was clear that these men did not have respect for her or her career. The same can be said for Serena, who had men preying on her while trying to further her modeling career, and Diana, a well-respected tattoo artist who had a man send her an extremely inappropriate email that disregarded her as a professional. All three women are professionals in their respective industries, yet men have crossed personal and professional boundaries, showing that they do not have respect for their work, them as a professional, nor as a human being.

Benevolent sexism

The fetishization and sexual objectification of tattooed women previously mentioned constitutes as benevolent sexism, but another significant way participants experienced this was through compliments from men that led to unwelcomed advances. For example, Raye talked about how men would use her tattoos as an opening:

“I do get occasional DMs from guys where they say something like, ‘your tattoos are really pretty, let's get coffee.’ I don't open them. I made this rule two or three years ago, that I don't open DMs from men.”

This is a common occurrence for the majority of the participants. Men compliment their tattoos and proceed to cross personal boundaries by asking them out on a date or initiating a sexually suggestive conversation. As Amara put it:

“...[People] are going to find a reason to be inappropriate if they want to be inappropriate, and if there isn't a reason to be inappropriate they're still going to be inappropriate. Having tattoos is just an easy way in.”

Even though these interactions may start off as “innocent” compliments, they often transition into men thinking that they can now ask for a date or send sexual messages and pictures. This is an experience most women encounter at one point or another; however, the difference is that visibly tattooed women's tattoos are seen as an open invitation for unsolicited conversation, and are used to initiate said conversation.

Tattoos & gender: rejecting the feminine apologetic & the double standard

Many participants discussed reactions they have gotten that are associated to them breaking gender norms and expectations of femininity. In particular, tattooing over areas that are more visible or sexualized, led to more backlash, and, in some cases, hostile aggression.

Rejecting the feminine apologetic

Several of the participants in my study encountered backlash for not performing the feminine apologetic, as they have multiple large tattoos in very visible places. Luna discussed getting the entirety of her front tattooed (including her neck, chest, breasts and nipples, and stomach) and how before and after getting it done there was a huge response that conveyed the attitude that she lost her femininity. She said:

“People always say ‘what a shame it is that you tattooed your chest.’...Even before I had gotten it done, when I just had the linework, a big comment I got was, ‘That’s a shame. You shouldn’t tattoo your chest, you’re not going to look like a lady anymore. It’s not very feminine.’ It was weird to me to get degraded

down to that, like it's important that I don't put anything on my breasts so that you can see them and still appreciate them.”

Similarly, Lita discussed how her partner's mom would respond to her getting more tattoos:

“If I'm super excited about getting a tattoo, [my partner's] mom will just not comment, or she'll say, 'Don't you think you have enough?' My partner's actually a tattoo artist and he gave me a face tattoo, and [his mom] was more concerned about if I'm going to be able to cover it up for wedding pictures.”

As Lita obtained more and more tattoos and started getting them done on more visible places, she began to reject the feminine apologetic, leading to her partner's mom being concerned that she would no longer look feminine enough in general and in wedding photos. The same happened to Luna. As she began to cover up her chest, a very gendered area, she began to reject the feminine apologetic, causing her to receive a significant amount of backlash.

By not performing the feminine apologetic, heavily tattooed women can even encounter severe harassment. Serenity discussed her experiences on the social media platform Tik Tok, and the comments she receives about her face tattoos: “This person told me that, ‘I should get 40 cents to buy a bullet because I shouldn't be on this earth because of how ugly my face is, and why did I do that to my face?’” She said that the comments about her face tattoos and how “she used to be so pretty before and now she is not” were becoming so frequent, that she had to block the words, “face,” “face tattoos,” “tatts,” “face tatts,” “ugly,” and “ugly face tatts.”

Tattoos on women are often not associated with traditional constructions of “good” femininity, but they are often more socially acceptable if the tattoos have meaning and/or if they are an acceptable size and design and in an acceptable (concealable) location (Atkinson, 2002; Craighead, 2011; Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007).

Participants like Luna, Lita, and Serenity are going against what is deemed as “acceptable” ways for women to “do” tattoos, by tattooing areas that are conventionally linked to femininity (i.e. the face and the breasts); therefore, they get backlash from the public, as well as family members.

The double standard

Previous scholars have found that although heavily tattooed men experience stigmatization, tattooed women are often perceived and judged more harshly and attract more attention (Hawkes et al., 2004; Irwin, 2000; Leader, 2016; Santos, 2009). This double standard between tattooed men and women is present in my findings. Amy discussed the difference between how people treat her husband who is also tattooed versus how she is treated:

“My husband has a few tattoos, he’s a teacher, and he doesn’t have to cover them up, and I don’t think people care at all. They don’t stare at him and think that anything is weird about him...But [people think] I look less approachable and I look like I must be mean or angry or a rebel. I think people, men mostly, also probably have this thought that I must want attention because I look like this.”

Due to tattooed women being seen as breaking traditional hegemonic femininity, as well as being more sexually objectified, they will often grab the attention of more people compared to tattooed men. This leads to people approaching women to touch their tattoos and ask questions about them, but when it comes to men, as one participant said, “No one’s going to walk up to a dude and say, ‘I see you got a little chest tattoo peeking out there’” (Raye). On women, even a small tattoo that is partially showing under their clothing is enough to invite attention, but this is often not the case for men. However, more research is needed to examine the differences between the interactions tattooed men and women experience.

Discussion

This study finds that visibly tattooed women experience negative interactions and behaviors, such as dehumanization, which includes objectification, fetishization, stereotyping, and not being respected as a professional, and ambivalent sexism. Heavily tattooed women experience these interactions and behaviors primarily due to them breaking norms of hegemonic femininity and rejecting the feminine apologetic.

Heavily tattooed women are seen as breaking traditional constructions of femininity and rejecting the feminine apologetic because they have multiple large tattoos in very visible places. Previous scholars have found that for women with tattoos to perform the feminine apologetic, their tattoos need to be small, concealable, and a more meaningful, “feminine” design, and if a woman’s tattoos are the exact opposite, they are seen as rejecting the feminine apologetic (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007).

The findings from this study support and expand upon these previous findings. The majority of this study’s participants received backlash from people they knew, as well as strangers, for obtaining more tattoos and tattooing over certain areas of the body that are sexualized and linked to femininity. The more tattoos the women collected and the more they covered up these areas, the more they rejected the feminine apologetic, which led to concerns of them losing their femininity and no longer looking beautiful, as well as hostile backlash for “ruining their bodies.” Previous scholars (Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007), focused on how women with tattoos perform the feminine apologetic, while this research highlights what happens when tattooed women reject the feminine apologetic.

Many of the experiences the participants discussed can be explained by ambivalent sexism as well. Ambivalent sexism is meant to reinforce traditional gender roles and preserve patriarchal structures in order to keep women in subordinate positions (Glick & Fiske, 1996;

Wade & Ferree, 2019). Considering visibly tattooed women are viewed as going against traditional gender norms and roles, they are seen as a threat to patriarchal structures; therefore, men will enact ambivalent sexist attitudes to keep these women in positions of submission.

Tattooed women experience both benevolent and hostile sexism. They experience benevolent sexism primarily in the form of being treated as a sexualized object. Men in particular create an idealized version of what a tattooed woman is based upon stereotypes and perceptions they have heard over time, such as tattooed women being more sexually promiscuous, more open to attention, and being into riskier, kinkier sexual activity. This then leads men to interact with tattooed women based upon their idealization, often putting tattooed women in uncomfortable positions. This explains why most of the participants experienced being sexually objectified and had their tattooed bodies fetishized by men a multitude of times. The participants in my study also experienced benevolent sexism in the form of men complimenting their tattoos, then immediately taking the conversation to an unsolicited, sexual level. By sexually objectifying heavily tattooed women or using their tattoos as a way to initiate a sexual conversation, the men enacting these forms of sexism are removing the women's agency and bodily autonomy, and trying to reinforce their dominance.

Heavily tattooed women experience hostile sexism in the way of people having a backlash response to them disrupting traditional, hegemonic gender norms. In general, hostile sexism reflects misogynistic ideals and is expressed through negative evaluations of women (Allport, 1954; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Wade & Ferree, 2019). This seems to worsen when tattoos are present, leading to various negative reactions towards and evaluations of tattooed women for going against hegemonic femininity and for being seen as flaunting their independence and bodily autonomy. Interactions such as being told to kill oneself because they ruined their face

with tattoos or being told that they “probably used to be so beautiful before they covered their body with tattoos,” are only two examples of hostile sexism experienced by the participants in this study. The hostile sexism experienced by the participants is meant to reinforce traditional gender norms, while simultaneously sanctioning them for rejecting these norms.

Tattooed women are seen for their tattooed body first and their inner being second. In general, men feel entitled to a woman’s body, and women are expected to be accepting of and complicit with this power dynamic. Heavily tattooed women encounter this entitlement far more, because they have permanently engraved their bodies in visible areas. This leads individuals to make the assumption that these women got tattooed for attention, and therefore must be accepting of being bombarded with questions about their tattoos, sexual advances, and nonconsensual touching of their tattoos.

Visibly tattooed women reject traditional femininity, whether this is intentional or not, but what they are really trying to convey is their love for art. As all of the participants in my study can attest to, tattoos are an art form, and the majority of their tattoos came from a love of art more than anything. However, when you are a tattooed woman the pieces of art that you got for yourself become an interactive art museum for the public, which people take full advantage of in multiple, harmful ways.

Being a visibly tattooed woman in a patriarchal society is a balancing act. Having tattoos allows women to have agency and bodily autonomy in a society that aims to control and oppress them, as well as allows women to express their inner-selves, their love for art, and to commemorate family, friends, pets, or special moments in their lives. However, when a tattooed body is female, this agency is often stripped away and meanings are placed on it by the patriarchal structures in which we exist. By having a visibly and heavily tattooed body, tattooed

women are seen as breaking traditional norms of femininity, leading to them being emblazoned with various meanings and assumptions about who they are as a person and becoming victims of dehumanization and ambivalent sexist attitudes.

Conclusion

Despite tattoos becoming more popular in recent years, heavily tattooed women are still seen as intriguing oddities and spectacles, and they are still facing the repercussions for breaking traditional norms of femininity. Through this qualitative study, it was found that by rejecting hegemonic femininity, heavily tattooed women primarily experience negative interactions and behaviors through various forms of dehumanization and ambivalent sexism. These interactions and behaviors are not only explained by the negative perceptions attached to heavily tattooed women for rejecting traditional constructions of femininity, but also rejecting the feminine apologetic that comes with women “doing” tattoos.

This work expands upon previous literature by providing a qualitative study on the first-hand, personal experiences tattooed women have for breaking traditional notions of femininity. Past literature was more concerned with the meanings behind women’s tattoos and the way women “do” tattoos (Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; Craighead, 2011; Dann & Callaghan, 2019; Leader, 2016; Mifflin, 1997; Santos, 2009), as well as others’ perceptions of women with tattoos (Armstrong, 1991; Guéguen, 2013; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007). By focusing on the actual lived experiences heavily tattooed women have for breaking norms of hegemonic femininity, scholars can begin to have a better understanding of how tattoos are a way for women to challenge patriarchal structures, but also what these women experience when these structures feel threatened by them.

Through this research I hope individuals can begin to understand the ways in which they engage in dehumanizing and sexist behavior towards visibly tattooed women, allowing them to unlearn these behaviors, as well as the negative stereotypes and perceptions they may have acquired over time. This research will also help people understand that most women who are tattooed, regardless of the amount, get tattoos for themselves. They do not exist for men's pleasure or the general public's entertainment. Women who have tattoos are human beings with independence and bodily autonomy, who are more than just the art they have adorned their body with.

Future research

I initially wanted to only focus on online interactions, but as I was conducting the interviews and analyzing my data, I found that whether the interactions occurred online or offline was not significant. The majority of the participants in my study said that they have had a fairly positive experience online due to being able to block people and being able to cultivate a community of like-minded people. When asked if they had more negative interactions in-person compared to online, eight of the participants said they experience or notice stigmatization more in person, two indicated that their experiences were about the same online and offline, and one said that it was worse online. Despite some having better experiences online than others, all of my participants have experienced negative interactions online for being tattooed, but all of them have also experienced a significant amount of negative and inappropriate interactions and behaviors in person. Therefore, I decided to focus on the negative interactions and behaviors my participants have encountered overall, whether it be online or in person. Future research could further examine how and why interactions tattooed women encounter online and in-person differ.

As previously stated in the methodology section, there is a need for more intersectional research regarding tattooed women. Santos's (2009) study on Chicana women and tattoo culture in East Los Angeles is currently the only qualitative study that utilizes an intersectional approach on women with tattoos. More intersectional research is needed, as it will broaden scholars' understanding of all tattooed women's experiences and highlight other social issues that were not addressed in my study. For example, the intersection of race and gender may cause tattooed women of color's experiences to differ than most of the women who participated in my study. Not only would women of color encounter the stigma, dehumanization, and ambivalent sexism that comes with having tattoos, but all of these would most likely increase due to their race. Within the tattoo industry, racism is still a prevalent issue that still needs to be addressed by the industry as a whole, as well as the field of social sciences.

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