SELF, STYLE, AND SERVICE:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GENDER, LABOR, AND EMBODIED CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE TATTOO INDUSTRY

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The tattoo industry is male-dominated and historically masculinized, and although women have been entering the industry in significant numbers for the last few decades, they still make up a minority of tattooers. Using data gathered from in-depth interviews with 9 women tattooers, this study looks into this gendered work environment, at the industry level as well as in each individual shop, through a feminist framework that draws from gender performativity theory and theoretical conceptions of body work, emotional labor, embodied cultural capital, and aesthetic labor. In addition to providing insight into women tattooers’ self-presentation and professionalism, the study uncovers the integral role that social media plays in the tattooer’s business and explores the boundaries between personal and professional identity in the digital age.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE ....................................................................................... 4

  Tattoo in the West .................................................................................................................. 4
  Historical background: Natives, slaves, sailors and freaks .................................................. 4
  Enter women: Tattoo renaissance and revolution ................................................................. 10

Women in the Workplace .................................................................................................... 13

  Working in tattoo ................................................................................................................ 13
  Women working in masculinized industries ........................................................................ 19
  Social media and the pink ghetto ......................................................................................... 21

Additional Theoretical Perspectives ....................................................................................... 22

  Gender, bodies and performativity ..................................................................................... 23
  Social capital and exchange ................................................................................................. 28
  Embodied cultural capital and aesthetic labor ..................................................................... 29

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................. 32

Participants ........................................................................................................................... 32

Interviews and Analysis ......................................................................................................... 33

Feminist Epistemologies ....................................................................................................... 35

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ............................................................................... 38

Industry Standards and Tattoo Conventions ......................................................................... 38

Client Interactions and Personal Touches ............................................................................ 46

Client inquiries and relational labor ..................................................................................... 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultations and booking</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor, Gender and Embodied Cultural Capital: Pulling It All Together</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not caring is caring: Denial and rejection as emotional labor</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long- and short-term embodied cultural capital</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE: MOVING FORWARD</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: Interview guide</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: A selection of participants’ Instagram profiles</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“You can be feminine, you can, you really can be anything in this industry, um, but it is, you know, just like anywhere else... there are dangers.”

- Charlotte, Participant

In the history of the American workplace, gender plays a central role. From colonization through most of the 19th century, the home was the workplace, and most work went into subsistence of the family (Wallach, 2012). Men worked primarily in farming capacities, cultivating crops for food and trade, caring for and slaughtering animals. Women typically cooked and sewed, and were responsible for the proper socialization and education of their children (Kerber, 1980; Kleinberg, 1999; Wallach, 2012). As industrialization and urbanization flourished, the workplace separated from the home and migrated into factories and offices. White working-class women and women of color from any socioeconomic background found jobs in factories and in the homes of wealthy families. It became customary for middle- and upper-class White women to stay at home tending to the needs of the family unit and keeping the house in order. Despite numerous social and political obstacles, women gained access to the labor market in great numbers over the course of the early- to mid-20th century. As a result of socialization processes, some occupations became identified – and devalued – as “women’s work.” These occupations often involved domestic skills like cooking, cleaning, sewing, childcare and nursing, and women’s participation in the business sector was restricted to secretarial tasks (Kessler-Harris, 1981).
In 2010, women made up almost half of the American workforce (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Although women have overcome much adversity in the workplace and in the public sphere more broadly, research shows that women do not experience the workplace as equals among their male coworkers. Across occupations and industries, women are paid less, on average, than men in comparable positions, and far fewer women hold executive positions than do men (Lean In & McKinsey & Company, 2017; National Women’s Law Center, 2017). Women also frequently experience sexual harassment and assault, oftentimes perpetrated by men who wield substantial influence over their work schedule, payment, and/or career trajectory (Berdahl, 2007; “TIME’S UP Organization Home Page,” 2017). Gender stereotypes fuel discrimination in the workplace; women are believed to be or treated as if they are less capable, less competent, more emotional and more demanding than men (Germain, Herzog, & Hamilton, 2012; Perrott, 2016; Ridgeway, 2009; Rumens, 2017). And, increasingly, women are working in occupations and industries that remain male-dominated and/or masculinized (Germain et al., 2012; Perrott, 2016). These women must navigate culturally prescribed gender roles that assume they should not be in those spaces or presume them ineffective in their workplace roles (Berdahl, 2007). They often go to great lengths to improve or protect their professional reputation or ‘fit in’ in the workplace culture (Perrott, 2016).

These issues are systemic, quietly potent and largely inescapable, but working women are not helpless. “[T]here is always room for agency, transcendence and resistance,” even, or, one could argue, especially, on a small scale – that is, at the site of the individual, at the level of the everyday (Perrott, 2016, citing Foucault, 1991). These agentic actions can be blatant, like pointing out when a male coworker is being sexist or pursuing legal ramifications, for example, or subtle, like subverting gender stereotypes to challenge narrow ideas of femininity (Perrott,
Women can adapt their appearance, their leadership styles, and their rhetoric. They can embrace and emphasize certain personality traits, both conventionally feminine and masculine. In short, they can acknowledge and appropriate the masculinized culture of their workplace, performing their gender in such a way so as to mitigate the challenges brought about by being a woman in a man’s role (Charles, 2014).

This study uses in-depth interviews to investigate women’s experiences encountering and negotiating gendered assumptions in the workplace. This work joins a rich body of literature on women in the workplace, providing the perspective of women working in an industry that has received little attention from scholars of gender: the tattoo industry. Communication scholars have, in recent years, taken an interest in tattoo’s role in the construction and conveyance of identity (Lane, 2014). Drawing from these insights and focusing on the performative nature of the workplace, of gender, and of identity, the study examines how women tattooers convey professionalism to colleagues and clients in a “historically hyper-masculine space” (Thompson, 2015, p. 129).

This new work also considers a social device that has hitherto been absent from scholarship about the tattoo industry: social media. In uncovering the role social media plays in the tattooer’s business, this research opens new avenues of inquiry regarding the workplace in the digital age, the relationship between social media and embodiment, and how social media is and can be mobilized in the campaign for inclusivity in this and other industries.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following chapter reviews literature relevant to this study and its theoretical framework. It begins by examining the tattoo industry historically, tracing tattoos and tattooing through Western history and situating it in current scholarship. It then explores the concepts of identity and the workplace, reviewing social structures specific to the tattoo industry and in gendered workspaces more broadly, material and digital. Finally, it will address the theoretical perspectives that inform this study’s conceptualization of the body as a medium for communication of gender and professional identity.

Tattoo in the West

Inquiries into tattoo can be found in a range of disciplines, including medicine, psychology, sociology, art, history, anthropology, gender studies, and communication (Lane, 2014). “While scholars have discussed tattooing for the past century,” writes Lane (2014), “only recently has the subject been treated as a serious area of research” (p. 398). Before addressing contemporary scholarship on tattoos and tattooing, it is important to historically and culturally contextualize the practice as it has existed in Western society. With roots in colonialism and complicated relationships with gender, race and class, the role of tattoo in American systems of oppression must be acknowledged given this study’s intersectional feminist approach.

**Historical background: Natives, slaves, sailors and freaks.** “The history of [Euro-American] tattooing,” Benson (2000) contends, is “thoroughly entangled in the processes of commodification, cultural appropriation, and global deracination” (p. 242). Scholars situate the
beginning of modern Western tattoo with the exploratory voyages of Captain James Cook in the 1760s (Barron, 2017; Caplan, 2000; Sanders, 2008). Tattooing was not wholly absent from Western Europe before that point, but for several centuries had been practiced strictly in a religious capacity (Barron, 2017; Sanders, 2008). Prior to Cook’s voyages, tattooing was referred to as pricking in the West (Barron, 2017; Sanders, 2008). After encountering the practice in the South Pacific, “Cook introduced the Tahitian word ta-tu meaning ‘to strike’ or ‘to mark’ and soon tattoo became the common term” (Sanders, 2008, p. 14).

The word tattoo was not the only thing Cook brought back with him to the West. Cook returned to England from his 1774 voyage to the Pacific with a “heavily tattooed Tahitian prince named Omai who was exhibited as an object of great curiosity to members of the British upper class” (Sanders, 2008, p. 15). The prince “sparked a tattooing vogue among the [aristocracy]” (Fleming, 2000, p. 67). Omai’s tattoos, though culturally unintelligible to these spectators, were, according to Guest (2000), folded into exoticized and feminized colonialist representations of the people of the South Pacific. As European imperialism proliferated, tattoo remained vital in the domination of colonized populations (Thompson, 2015). For example, in Oceania, indigenous peoples often used tattoo in a ceremonial capacity to signify individual achievements and group identity, and tattooing was often considered a sacred, spiritual practice. According to tattoo anthropologist Lars Krutak, banning the body modification processes that were culturally unique to indigenous peoples made them appear more Western, making it “easier to subjugate them to [Western] ideals and break … patterns of local power and belief” (quoted in Posner, 2018).

While the colonized were prevented from engaging in traditional practices of tattoo, tattoos appeared with more frequency on seafaring Englishmen. In a tradition initiated by Cook’s crewmen, who were tattooed by Tahitians in commemoration of their expedition, “sailors that
charted … new waters were tattooed by natives … in celebration of life, discovery, and cross-cultural liaisons” (Madame Chinchilla, 1997, p. 2). “Unfortunately,” tattoo artist and historian Madame Chinchilla continues,

with time, discovery turned to wars and these men who were about to fight for their country were celebrating possibly the last moments of their lives. In getting a tattoo they were expressing camaraderie, coupled with feelings of fear and loneliness. (p. 2)

Tattoos were deeply embedded in the compulsory performance of a sailor’s (heterosexual) masculinity, as evidenced by this testimony from sailor George “Doc” Webb, whose decades-long career as a tattooer began in 1926:

Every sailor worth his salt had a naked girl tattoo on his thigh, a star and moon on one hand and a small anchor on the other. Then they were considered a top man, fit to drink and fight with the best. (Madame Chinchilla, 1997, p. 2, emphasis added)

Tattoos were also used in the identification and surveillance of convicts and criminals. During the first half of the 19th century, when the British sent their convicts to penal colonies in Australia, “the tattoos of each convict were scrupulously recorded in Conduct Registers” (J. Bradley, 2000, p. 138) upon arrival. When a convict escaped, their identity would be confirmed by their tattoos, and “British penal and policing systems continued to rely on similar methods of identification” (p. 138) even after the flow of convicts ceased in 1868.

Those methods of identification leached from policing systems into public social conscience, solidifying an association between tattoos and social deviance, particularly in regard to class. Cesare Lombroso, widely considered the father of modern criminology, conceived of l’uomo delinquente, the ‘criminal man,’ as a “primitive,” “savage” and “biologically determined towards antisocial behavior and acts of criminality” (Barron, 2017, p. 11). In addition to other physical distinctions, Lombroso (2006, originally published 1880) identified tattoos as indicative of a criminal predisposition:
One of the most singular characteristics of primitive men and those who still live in a state of nature is the frequency with which they undergo tattooing. … [The practice] occurs only among the lower classes—peasants, sailors, workers, shepherds, soldiers, and even more frequently among criminals. (p. 58)

This understanding of the tattooed criminal was colored by racism as well. As Barron (2017) notes, “Lombroso unambiguously linked tattooing to ‘inferior’ non-Western cultures” (p. 12). Lombroso was not alone in thinking non-Western cultures inferior; indeed, the need to civilize other inferior populations was often invoked as justification for Western imperialist ambitions. Some imperial power structures were maintained by marking certain bodies as inferior using tattoos. For example, during the reign of the British East India Company, “attempts were made in India to use tattoos to recognize particular ‘criminal’ castes and tribes” (Anderson, 2000, p. 105). These individuals were rendered doubly uncivilized in the eyes of their colonizers, being both non-Western and criminalized. In America, the institution of slavery was similarly supported through practices of forced body modification. Slave owners would mutilate their slaves by branding, scarification, and other violent methods, flagging Black bodies as targets for what Browne (2015) termed “racialized surveillance” (p. 91; see also Garvey, 2013).

In the late 1800s, tattoos again became fashionable among upper class in England and America. As Fisher (2002) explains, tattoos in this capacity functioned as signals of worldliness, regardless of how well-traveled or culturally sophisticated the wearer might have been. Simply, she says, “in the wealthy class, the purpose of tattoos was to impress, and in the working class, tattoos were to express” (p. 95). Around this time, the invention of electric tattoo machine made tattoo more accessible. Not only was getting tattooed by machine substantially less painful than traditional tattooing methods, becoming a tattooer was less costly and required minimal skill (Fisher, 2002; Sanders, 2008). The end of the 19th century also marked the transition from what Atkinson (2003) calls the “Colonial/Pioneer era” of the sociogenesis of tattoo (1760s-1870s) to
the “Circus/Carnival era” (1880s-1920s), during which tattooed bodies were displayed for the entertainment of White Americans who “shared with Europeans a similar fascination toward and repulsion from tattooed bodies” (p. 33). At first, those tattooed bodies typically belonged to natives enslaved by explorers and missionaries. In time, White sailors returning from abroad took advantage of the new market for tattooed bodies and sold their bodies to be exhibited as “live wild men.” As public demand for “tattooees on the carnival circuits blossomed,” recounts Atkinson (2003), “the demand for professional tattooists also increased” (p. 34). With an increasing supply of White Americans wanting to be tattooed and a growing number of tattooers due to both demand and the availability of the electric tattoo machine, tattoo in North America thrived.

Eventually, the supply of tattooed bodies surpassed demand. As public interest waned, individuals whose livelihoods depended on the spectacle of their bodies grew and diversified their tattoos (Fisher, 2002). Being tattooed was no longer enough to draw in crowds: “Circus performers and carnival workers began to blend their shows, and as a result, tattooed dwarves, tattooed sword swallowers, and tattooed lion tamers replaced the ‘live savage’” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 35). Tattooed women started to “edge men out of the limelight” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 20), and they didn’t have to acquire new skills to maintain their value as attractions. By virtue of being women, they were more peculiar – and more titillating – than tattooed men who competed for attention. Early trailblazers like Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward told fabricated stories of abduction and torture by ‘native savages,’ indulging the audiences’ prejudice against indigenous peoples on the Western frontier (Mifflin, 2013). Exoticized and eroticized, tattooed women “found themselves wearing more revealing costumes … leading some critics to describe [their performances] as ‘a peepshow within a freak show’” (Fisher, 2002, p. 96). As their association
with vulgarity and social deviance escalated, public fascination turned into disgust, and by the 1920s, tattooed bodies were no longer profitable, and tattoo had fallen into “disrepute” in the U.S. (Sanders, 2008, p. 18; see also Atkinson, 2003; Fenske, 2007; Fisher, 2002; Govenar, 2000; Oettermann, 2000).

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, tattoos were the territory of working-class men. Tattoo parlors became “social club[s] where individuals existing on the fringe of society would meet and swap stories of adventure, grandiosity and bravado” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36) and where tattoos were used to assert one’s masculinity. During this period, Atkinson (2003) notes, tattooers and their clients constructed the ‘hyper-patriotic’ style now known as ‘Traditional,’ relying heavily on the tattoos military servicemen had collected while deployed. A handful of tattooers started teaching their wives how to tattoo to increase efficiency in their shops; these women would color in lines drawn by their husbands or work directly from stock designs known as “flash” (Mifflin, 2013). Middle- and working-class women flirted with tattoo as a way to assert their independence. From the 1950s to the 1970s, tattoo was claimed by social rebels: radical youth, the hippie and rock star subcultures, motorcycle gangs, and prisoners (Atkinson, 2003; Fisher, 2002). “[D]eviance and tattoo were synonymous” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 42), and as far as the mainstream was concerned, tattooed people were “sleazeballs” at best (Mifflin, 2013, p. 54).

Until this point, Western women’s involvement in tattoo was limited; tattooed women were a rarity, and even so they went under the needle far more often than they wielded one. But in the 1970s women entered the industry as tattooers and customers, and as a result, they brought about a radical transformation: “Like a pebble dropped in the middle of a placid pond, women’s
involvement in the practice stirred ripples across the entire tattoo figuration” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 44).

**Enter women: Tattoo renaissance and revolution.** Women did not suddenly decide to take up tattooing; a cocktail of social justice movements set the stage for their entrance. “It’s no coincidence,” writes Mifflin (2013),

that women’s initial interest in [tattoo] came in the wake of feminism’s first wave in the late 19th century, that a second craze crested in the suffragist ’20s, and that women tattooists broke the gender barrier in the feminist ’70s. (p. 7)

These women recognized the emancipatory potential of tattoo and seized the opportunity to redefine femininity and demonstrate their bodily autonomy and personal agency (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 2013). Getting tattooed was a particularly appealing act of defiance because it was “a pre-existing signifier of masculine deviance” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 43); tattooed women were redefining not only what it meant to be feminine, but what it meant to be masculine, as well.

As Atkinson (2003) points out, the feminist surge was not the only social development that created the environment in which women burst onto the tattoo scene. The sexual revolution and civil rights movement were likewise influential. A new emphasis was placed on one’s identity, particularly in relation to subversion of social power structures. “The body became a popular billboard for ‘doing’ identity politics” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 42), defined by Dunn (1998) as “the process of aligning oneself with others who intersubjectively share feelings of marginality and oppression within a figuration” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 42). The foregrounding of identity politics drove a transition in tattoo shops:
Where once customers chose tattoos from ['flash'] sheets and so ‘had to fit their individual psyche into pre-congealed images that were often very out-of-date,’ today’s tattoo artist functions as ‘a kind of therapist: a vehicle to help people channel their unconscious urges to the surface’... It is at this moment in the tattoo renaissance – when tattooing comes to see itself... as a form of semiotic writing – that women enter the field as practitioners and customers. (Fleming, 2000, p. 63)

This change, a manifestation of what is often referred to as the “tattoo renaissance,” prompted scholars to look into and theorize about tattoo as it relates to identity construction and communication, “shifting the focus away from what the tattooed body means to what it does” (Sullivan, 2001, n.p., emphasis added). Barron (2017) elaborates on the tattoo as a semiotic device used to express both group affiliation and uniqueness (see also Sanders, 2008). Drawing on MacCormack’s (2006) contention that tattoos create the body as a text legible within social, cultural, and temporal contexts, Barron (2017) addresses the self-constructive nature of tattoo and its complex relationship with polysemy, echoing Oksanen and Turtiainen’s (2005) sentiments concerning tattoo narratives: “The human body is, at the same time, both a subject actively seeking meaning and a mere object to be judged” (p. 111).

Some scholars argue that, despite the mainstreaming of tattoo since the tattoo renaissance, it will never entirely break free from its association with deviance. Tattoo is still “perceived [within the dominant Western culture] as a social marking that, if not inscribed on the bodies of deviants, then constitutes a deviant practice on the bodies of individuals,” wrote Fisher (2002, p. 97). Patterson and Schroeder (2010) maintain that tattoo’s persistent association with deviance, “its shady background, its subalternity,” is precisely what “lends tattooing its credibility as a form of resistance” (p. 254-255) and its power as a tool of self-expression and identification. Fleming (2000) suggests that tattoo’s deviance is intrinsic to the practice and reflects a collective social anxiety around knowing who we are:
Tattoo’s uncanny power to affront (and so arouse) the liberal subject is a power of horror that largely coincides with the special effect identified by Julia Kristeva under the name of *abjection*… the suggestion that identity is constituted, not in the depths, but at the outer surface of the subject is experienced… as a type of claustrophobia. (p. 63)

In other words, when we incorporate a tattoo onto/into our body, we are defined not by *who* we are, but by *what* we are. This constitutes, as Patterson and Schroeder (2010) put it, “an attack on the sovereignty of selfhood” (p. 258) that violates traditional organization of the body and the self (see also MacCormack, 2006). Regardless of ‘where’ identity is located in/on the subject, scholars agree that custom tattoo designs say something about the tattooed person and how they want to be perceived, by others or, perhaps, by themselves.

Much can be conveyed through a tattoo’s design: ethnic or cultural identity might be found in style and imagery; social identity or personal philosophy might be expressed by way of visual references to popular culture; typically mundane images could be imbued with personal significance. Importantly, a considerable amount of scholarship remarks on the communicative capacity of tattoo placement (i.e., where on the body the tattoo is located), particularly with regard to gender roles and perceived tattoo stigma (Fisher, 2002; Goulding & Follett, 2002; Sanders, 2008). Several scholars are careful to note, however, that not all tattoos are the result of deliberate, thoughtful identity work (Braunberger, 2000; Fisher, 2002; Roberts, 2012). Some tattoos are simply decorative, an aesthetic choice rather than an external representation of one’s internal self. However, these tattoos still perform identity in the same way that clothing can (see Crane, 2000).

As mentioned previously, this study comes from an intersectional feminist perspective, which recognizes that one’s gender cannot be divorced from one’s race and class. This approach is supported by studies conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s, which grapple with how these characteristics (gender, race, class, and sometimes sexuality) affect individual and group
experiences with, and opinions of, tattoo. For example, DeMello (2000) explores the “middle-class repackaging of the tattoo” (p. 3) that occurred with the tattoo renaissance, “a process that highlight[ed] the tattoo’s ‘primitive,’ exotic roots and at the same time [sought] to erase its white, working-class beginnings in this country” (p. 3). Along those lines, Pitts (2003) addresses “the ethnic and racial coding of body practices by white, largely middle-class Westerners” (p. 20) as they relate to tattoo, placing this issue in a postcolonial theoretical context. In her analysis of high fashion as portrayed in *Elle* magazine, Balsamo (1995) observes racialized representations of the primitive that evidence this repackaging process. As Pitts (2003) explains, primitivism as represented on the bodies of American women of color is really a sign of exoticism meant for those whose identities are implied to be squarely located in the camp of the nonexotic, “civilized,” Western world – not African Americans, but whites. Alternatively, when white models wear the “primitive” look, … they can reinforce the idea of “voluntary” ethnicity and exoticism for the white consumer.

While this study looks primarily at gender, it also considers race, class, and sexuality as they factor into gender and relate to the performance of professionalism.

**Women in the Workplace**

Having addressed the historical background of tattoo and how contemporary scholars understand its process in identity construction and communication, this review will now turn to the literature on identity in the workplace, an important component in this thesis. It will first introduce the workplace in the tattoo industry with a particular focus on the experiences of women tattooers. It will then look at how scholars have found gender and professional identity to intersect when women work in traditionally masculinized industries. Finally, it discusses the digital workplace, as produced by social media.

**Working in tattoo.** In his survey of literature on tattoo, Lane (2014) observes that research has, for the most part, concentrated on understanding tattooed people – that is, “the consumers of tattoos rather than the producers” (p. 398). Because of this, more research has been
done on tattoos in the workplace than on the workplace in the tattoo industry. Generally, tattooed people experience legal discrimination by potential employers (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011), in part because of negative stereotypes about their personal attributes and work habits (Ellis, 2015) and what their bodies offer in terms of aesthetic labor – that is, how “managers can leverage employees’ physical appearance and corporeal attributes on the production side to promote a positive consumer experience” (Timming, 2017, p. 1043) and “fit with an organizational ‘brand’” (Simpson & Pullen, 2018, p. 170). For example, Pettinger (2004) documents the aesthetic labor of salespeople in clothing stores, finding that salespeople in higher-end stores generally dress and present themselves as professionals while “the predominantly young (under 20) and entirely female workforce” at trendy “value fashion” stores supplement their basic uniforms with “hair and make-up styles that reflect the class, age and gender backgrounds of the workers, a form of working class femininity” (p. 178).

In the tattoo industry, being tattooed is an essential qualification of a trustworthy and competent tattooer; after all, only a tattooed person can answer the uninitiated clients’ most pressing question: ‘Does it hurt?’ (Fisher, 2002). Tattooers’ aesthetic labor also includes “branding their bodies to showcase their particular artistic genre” (Simpson & Pullen, 2018, p. 170). Client interactions are the heart of a tattooer’s job, and in addition to the aesthetic labor their bodies perform, they must master interpersonal skills like “learning how to evaluate customers and developing styles of interaction that will win trust” (Sanders, 2008, p. 131). Tattooers must learn to assess each customer’s physical disposition (for example, are they likely to faint?) and figure out exactly what the customer wants from their tattoo (Fleming, 2000; Sanders, 2008). All this contributes to standards of professionalization in the tattoo industry. These standards are usually taught and achieved through an apprentice system in which aspiring
tattooers study under veterans (Adams, 2012; Fisher, 2002; Sanders, 2008). Adams (2012) notes, however, that it has become easier for self-taught tattooers, especially formally trained artists, to enter the industry without having apprenticed. Tattoo licensure requirements vary by state, and some states require proof that an artist has completed an apprenticeship before issuing them a license. Others, however, only require completion of a written exam and skills assessment, and some states don’t require a license at all (“Licensed tattoo artist: Job description and education requirements,” n.d.).

The technical training, trade secrets and networking opportunities received through an apprenticeship are all imbued with cultural socialization. Apprenticed tattooers may attach cultural meaning to the apprenticeship model, finding apprenticed tattooers as a collective to “embody symbols of tradition, respect, sacrifice and professionalism” (Wicks & Grandy, 2007, p. 350; see also Vail, 2000), whereas self-taught tattooers tend not to place as much value in their socialization. Wicks and Grandy (2007) differentiate between membership in a collectivity and participation in the culture of that collectivity, arguing that it is participation, not membership, that informs cultural identity within the tattoo community.

Because the majority of tattooers are men (Barron, 2017; Sanders, 2008), research on tattooers generally focuses on men or considers gender only tangentially, if at all. Mifflin (2013) placed women at the center of her history of Western tattoo, concentrating on the roles and experiences of both tattooed women and women tattooers from the Circus/Carnival era onward. “Despite their unconventional profession,” she writes,
women tattooists have struggled with many of the same concerns their peers face in the corporate arena, in the art world, and on the playing field: issues of separatism, competition, and the sort of biological determinism that says a woman naturally runs or throws or draws (as one male tattooist described his female apprentice’s early style) “like a girl.” (p. 7)

According to Mifflin (2013) the barriers to the tattoo profession have, at this point, been cleared for women just starting out in their careers. Not only do men and women “‘work together and learn from each other on a completely equal footing’… [women] no longer feel compelled to tattoo like men [stylistically] in order to gain acceptance (or clients)” (p. 109).

While women tattooers might not tattoo like men, they may be tattooed like men (Thompson, 2015). Simpson and Pullen (2018) recently found that “the admired aesthetic and ‘cultural authority’ of cool as a source of differentiation and belonging help tattooists contest assaults on their status and authority as both artists and professionals” (p. 182). “Cool,” however, is “generally observed as an admired and respected aspect of masculine display” (p. 173).

According to Sanders (2008),

Women tend to regard the tattoo (commonly a small, delicate design) as a permanent body decoration primarily intended for personal pleasure and the enjoyment of those with whom they are most intimate… Since tattoos on women are especially stigmatizing, placement on private parts of the body allows women to retain unsullied identities when in contact with casual associates or strangers. (p. 48–49)

The women tattooers in Simpson and Pullen’s (2018) study “all sported large tattoos… highlighting how a ‘cool aesthetic’ aligns with but is not exclusive to the bodies of men” (p. 177). The study does not address the intentionality behind their tattoos, but the aesthetic labor performed by their masculinized bodies should not go unnoted.

Despite the disadvantages women tattooers have faced, perhaps the most well-known tattooer in the world is a woman, Kat Von D (Mifflin, 2013). Gaining massive mainstream exposure in the 2000s through her participation on reality TV – first appearing in Miami Ink, then landing her own show, LA Ink – Von D has since launched a popular line of cosmetics with
Sephora and published two books about her career. Von D is a somewhat contentious figure among tattooers. “[S]ome call her a sellout who made a commercial spectacle of a secret society; others consider her a talented artist who would be stellar if she had spent more time tattooing and less cultivating her celebrity” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 114). At the request of the producing network, Von D had a mostly female staff on LA Ink. The two tattooers she hired were accomplished women dedicated to their art, which “delighted” many in the community (Mifflin, 2013, p. 114). However, some tattooers are averse to Von D’s sexually “provocative public image,” believing it promotes the idea that in order to succeed in the tattoo industry women must satisfy highly sexualized feminine stereotypes (Mifflin, 2013, p. 114). One woman tattooer “applauds Von D’s success” Mifflin (2013) recounts, “but regrets that it’s so contingent on a ‘very cultivated, feminized’ look, especially when so many other women, she says, have ‘managed to establish ourselves with some credibility in a very male-dominated field without conforming to it’” (p. 114).

It is worth noting that the mainstreaming of tattoo has “broadened both the racial and class diversity of both customers and artists” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 119). There is, Mifflin (2013) notes, a significant faction of openly lesbian tattooers, many of whom claim their sexuality hasn’t presented any professional obstacles for them. “A few [lesbian tattooers] who present as masculine say that it has even protected them from the unwarranted sexual attention many straight tattooists experience at work” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 119).

Importantly, Black women have been conspicuously absent from tattoo (Mifflin, 2013; Thompson, 2015). The problem could be partly economic; when one of Mifflin’s (2013) male interviewees tried to establish a diverse studio, he had trouble finding Black women to apprentice. “There weren’t really many women of color tattooing,” he said, “and the few who
were couldn’t afford to sustain a typical unpaid year-long apprenticeship” (p. 120). And in fact, African Americans in 2010 had the highest poverty rate of any racial or ethnic group (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.). Out of 65 women tattooers Thompson (2015) interviewed, only one was Black. During her recruiting process, Thompson (2015) explains,

I found very few African Americans at the shops and tattoo conventions that I attended. At a typical tattoo convention, I would often see only one African American male tattooist, if any. Yet it is apparent that African Americans do get tattooed in significant numbers. Therefore I suspect that there is a good deal of segregation in the tattoo world, with African American’s getting a lot of their work from African American– owned shops. This segregation stems historically from the overlap between tattoo shops and bikers or motorcycle clubs, which did not hide their racist sentiments. (p. 15)

The discrepancy between the number of white women tattooers and women tattooers of color is reflected in what little scholarship exists about women tattooers. There can be little doubt, however, that racial discrimination would compound the gender-based discrimination women tattooers encounter in the industry (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981).

Away from the tattoo industry, tattooed women workers often face gender-based and tattoo-based discrimination from both customers and employers (Baumann, Timming, & Gollan, 2016; Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). Deal, Altman and Rogelberg (2010) found that some employers have policies requiring women, but not men, to cover up their tattoos. Baumann, Timming and Gollan’s (2016) work explores the “interplay between gender and body art in front-line service employees” (p. 37), focusing specifically on two notably masculinized professions: surgeons and mechanics. They found that customers preferred woman surgeons, but male mechanics, and preferred employees without a visible tattoo over those with one. While the researchers do not discuss potential reasons behind these preferences, one could posit that consumers preferred woman surgeons over male surgeons because of social association between women and care-taker roles. Regarding the question of intersectionality, they found no evidence that customers preferred tattooed men to tattooed women. In fact, the tattooed woman surgeon
was preferred over the tattooed male surgeon, and whether or not women mechanics were
tattooed made no difference in consumer preference; they simply did not want a woman
mechanic working on their car.

Gender discrimination in the workplace has been studied extensively in a number of
disciplines. Scholarship concerning women working in masculinized industries does not
typically consider body art. There are, however, a few studies that address working in
masculinized industries from women’s perspectives – their experiences with gender
discrimination with employers and customers as well as their reactions to and strategies for
dealing with that discrimination.

Women working in masculinized industries. Research in this area at the end of the
twentieth century, while spanning a variety of disciplines including communication, women’s
and gender studies, management and organizational studies, psychology, and sociology, was
limited to backgrounds, personalities, value systems and business strategies of women who
worked in “male-dominated occupations” (Greenfeld, Greiner, & Wood, 1980; Lemkau, 1979,
1983; Olson & Currie, 1992) and impacts of this work on women’s physical and mental health
(Finkel, 1985; Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Johnson, 1987; Johnson, Fischman, Matnoski, &
Diamond, 1986). Bergman and Hallberg (2002) developed the Women Workplace Culture
Questionnaire in order to assess psychosocial conditions of women working in male-dominated
industries. Approaching the issue from a public health perspective, they identified a connection
between perceived workplace stressors (perceived burdens on the respondent, perceived burdens
on women, sexual harassment, organizational support) and women’s psychological and somatic
health. More recent scholarship has mainly focused on men in feminized industries, such as
nursing (McDowell, 2015; Shen-Miller & Smiler, 2015; Sobiraj, Rigotti, Weseler, & Mohr, 2015), and elementary school teaching and childcare (Sobiraj et al., 2015).

‘Masculinized industries’ in this study refers to industries or occupations “historically dominated by men embodying masculine, heterosexual work styles” (Collins & Callahan, 2012, p. 455). Collins (2015) elaborates, differentiating masculinized industries from industries that are male-dominated, gendered, and/or masculine. All four descriptors apply to industries that “generally share a history of favoring and privileging men over women” (p. 416); male-dominated, gendered, and/or masculine industries “generally favor men but do not necessarily adopt archetypes or standards that favor one particular sexual orientation over another” (p. 417) as masculinized industries do. By this, Collins (2013) means that ‘correct’ participation in a masculinized industry is grounded in “hegemonic expectations for the overtly masculine embodiment of gender” (p. 258). Collins studies the implications of this for gay (feminized or feminine) men working in masculinized industries. Dozier (2017) interviewed self-identified masculine women to ascertain how such women manage stigma experienced in the workplace because of their gender nonconformity. Working in male-dominated settings was found to be one of the strategies masculine women employ to cope with this stigma. This suggests that in gendered workspaces, particularly in masculinized industries, masculine embodiment impacts workers’ experiences regardless of gender. Masculine men may be favored and feminine women disfavored by employers, colleagues or customers (Doering & Thébaud, 2017); conceptually, masculine/masculinized women and feminine/feminized men exist in a gray area of workplace privilege.

Collins (2015) lists the following as examples of masculinized industries: “law enforcement, oil and gas/petroleum, military/defense, construction, fire service/emergency
services, industrial manufacturing, aviation, automotive/transportation, agriculture/fishing/hunting, [and] mining” (p. 417). Two of these industries were recently studied in the context of gender and legitimation of professional skill. Germain, Herzog & Hamilton (2012) investigated the gender barriers faced by women working as aircraft pilots and flight instructors, finding that “the lack of acceptance, self-efficacy, lack of social support from organizations, flight instructors and family, and stereotyping are among the top obstacles women encounter during their flight training, often leading them to quit” (p. 435). Perrott (2016) explored how women firefighters ‘do gender’ in masculinized workplaces through in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. She found that women were ‘othered’ in this masculine workplace, that they “perform[ed] at a higher standard to achieve minimal acceptance by male coworkers” (p. 6), and that, despite obstacles presented by their genders and their gendered bodies, women do retain the agency necessary to navigate and counteract subordination.

**Social media and the pink ghetto.** Businesses in a wide variety of industries, masculinized or not, have taken advantage of social media since its inception. If they choose to incorporate social media into their marketing strategy, businesses can use profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among other platforms, as means of product promotion, customer relations (D. Bradley, 2017), and brand development (Blevins & Ragazzino, 2019; Kupfer, Pähler vor der Holte, Kübler, & Hennig-Thurai, 2018) and promotion (Cole, Denardin, & Clow, 2017). As Shade (2014) points out, maintaining a business’s social media presence is often the responsibility of women. Indeed, Levinson (2015) refers to social media as the “pink ghetto,” because “the often low-prestige jobs are almost exclusively populated by women” (n.p.) who are “particular types of eager, sociable, and responsive servants to their employers and clients” (Mayer, 2014, p. 58).
In addition to providing a branding mechanism for businesses and corporations, social media has spawned a new age of personal branding among average users. Senft (2013) conceptualizes this “commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (p. 346) as microcelebrity. Banet-Weiser and Juhasz (2011) refer to it as self-branding. Corporate entities have harnessed the commercial potential of the self-branded individual by means of social media influencers, “one form of microcelebrity who accumulate a following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives, upon which advertorials for products and services are premised” (Abidin, 2016, p. 86). It can be argued that in cultivating a self-brand, influencers are performing aesthetic labor for the businesses that use them to advertise. Duffy’s (2017) work shows that this labor is often markedly gendered and highly performative. Each piece of content, whether it be a tweet, Instagram post, or Facebook status update, can be considered a stylized act through which the influencer establishes and communicates their online identity. Performativity, gender performativity in particular, is discussed further in the following section.

Additional Theoretical Perspectives

The first part of this section focuses on feminist perspectives on the body as a socially constructed text, particularly emphasizing the theoretical contributions of Judith Butler and Susan Bordo. The second part addresses social capital and exchange, emphasizing the work of Pierre Bourdieu. These theoretical perspectives are brought together in the third part, which returns to the concept of aesthetic labor to illustrate the framework within which workplace relations regarding gender, race, class, and sexuality, among other identifiers, can be understood.
Gender, bodies and performativity. Butler (1988) articulates the crux of her seminal piece “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” early: “[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a styled repetition of acts” (p. 519, emphasis in original). One must, according to Butler, have access to, understand, and draw from temporally located social scripts of gender in order to effectively construct and communicate a gender identity; or, in the words of Brady and Schirato (2011), “to have, gain, claim or be assigned an identity, one must be recognizable and explicable within a particular grid of intelligibility that makes subjects appear, and authorizes the subject’s status as an identity-in-waiting” (p. 6, emphasis added). Gender is, therefore, not an innate characteristic of the body, but rather something expressed over time in a particular historical and cultural context. This echoes sentiments expressed by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) in her canonical text The Second Sex: “one is not born, but, rather becomes, a woman” (as cited in Butler, 1986, p. 35, emphasis added). One’s gender can be conceived of as a sum of all of their gendered acts, which may rise out of conscious or unconscious adherence to prescribed gender roles and/or corporeal experiences of oppression, violence, or privilege. Here opens up the possibility for masculine women, feminine men, and non-binary individuals, though Butler would regard any professed gender identity as a “compelling illusion” (p. 520).

Additionally, and importantly for this study, one’s performative gender is fluid. Balsamo (2002) establishes gender as a “boundary concept” (p. 685) whose contours are determined and re-determined through continuous negotiation between the “physiological sexual characteristics of the human body” and the “cultural context within which that body ‘makes sense’” (p. 685). Gender dances the lines between the “seemingly stable” dichotomies of human/artificial and
nature/culture (p. 685). Technology exists to alter bone structure (rhinoplasty, mentoplasty, etc.) and tissue composition (liposuction, breast augmentation, upper lid Westernization, etc.), which means that individuals can voluntarily alter their bodies to conform to gendered ideals, which, as Balsamo points out, obscures racial or ethnic variation and is prone to impermanent trends. This illustrates just how subjective gender is – and if the “correct” way to appear feminine is liable to change, then gender is temporally and spatially situated, and cannot be rigid or innate, but must be flexible.

While voluntarily altering one’s body (through cosmetic surgery, tattoos, piercings, etc.) is undoubtedly an agentic action, the role of agency in postmodern theories of gender has been subject to debate since the diffusion of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ‘doing gender,’ which conceptualizes gender as being something one ‘does’ rather than ‘is.’ Vidal-Oritz (2009) criticized ‘doing gender’ as lacking explanatory power, as it “does not fully explore questions of resistance and agency” (p. 101). Indeed, the term ‘agency’ is absent from West and Zimmerman’s (1987) original articulation of ‘doing gender’ and only appears a handful of times in their later attempts to clarify and rebut criticisms of the theory (West & Fenstermaker, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Interestingly, however, Santos (2009) used the concept of ‘doing’ gender (and race and class, as articulated by West & Fenstermaker, 1995) specifically for the purpose of studying the social agency of Chicanas in East Los Angeles who use tattoo to subvert oppressive cultural expectations that they “preserve their natural body” (Santos, 2009, p. 93) when Chicanos are not held to the same standard.

Butler’s theory of performativity has also been interrogated for its treatment of agency. Here, agency does not equate to influence over the gender roles and gendered social scripts from
which performative acts are drawn or through which they are interpreted. Rather, agency resides in the actor’s participation in the repetitive performance of gender. In Butler’s words:

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (Butler, 1990, pp. 198–199, emphasis in original)

Rich (1996) illustrates the material impact of agentic gender performativity in her 1980 piece “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” citing the lesbian’s socially enforced “double life” (p. 139). She writes, “[H]er job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but a heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of ‘real’ women,” (p. 133, emphasis in original). The lesbian’s performativity is, in this circumstance, a purposeful broadcasting of the identity she needs to be perceived by others rather than the identity she understands as her own, which is also constituted by gender acts, but acts which may feel more authentic to the lesbian. This façade is often, as Rich points out, for the sake of the lesbian’s economic stability, as LGBT individuals can be fired for their gender or sexual identity.

Interpersonal forces can also ‘work on’ gender performance, as demonstrated in makeover reality television shows. In her analysis of male subjects on these types of shows, Weber (2009) explores the flexibility of masculinity when performing feminized actions, drawing on R.W. Connell’s (1987) conception of hegemonic masculinity, which “presumes a biological essentialism: Man is not created. Man simply is” (Weber, 2009, p. 183). How, then, can any man need help from these shows to achieve ideal masculinity if it is a naturally occurring condition? Weber outlines several ways that makeover shows “mitigate concerns that the makeover will feminize [the male subject]” (p. 178), including allowing them to retain agency through performative reluctance and independence, maintaining relaxed and “unprocessed” stylization,
and reinforcing male (hetero)sexual dominance. Weber also points out how makeover shows must ignore or erase other aspects of their subjects’ identities – such as race, class, and sexuality – that may systemically dictate their access to opportunities for conventional success.

Bordo’s (1993b, 1998) contribution to this study’s theoretical framework lies in her work on the materiality of the body. She finds Butler’s (1990) texts (subjects) to be “signifiers without context” (Bordo, 1993b, p. 294). Context here is materiality – that is, the “concrete” body as situated “in a particular time and place, in the ‘middle’ of things, always” (Bordo, 1998, p. 191; see also Hekman, 1995). While Butler argues that “the materiality of the body … is not prior to discourse, but is its effect” (Butler, 1993, p. 30), Bordo (1993b, 1998) emphasizes that the experience and expression of gender happens in and through bodies, and that to consider performativity as precursory to materiality is to treat gender abstractly, with no practical application. As Easton (Pollock, Rifkin, Easton, Gabriel, & Suriano, 1995) puts it, “With what do you perform but with the materiality of a body?” (p. 143).

At the same time, there are some performative acts which are necessarily corporeal. Femininity in the West is laden with beauty ideals; of particular interest to Bordo (1993b) is the thinness standard to which women are held. Women who pursue thinness through dieting, exercise, and other forms of self-regulation, are, Bordo would argue, performing embodied femininity, even to the detriment of their physical and mental health. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) provide the additional example of femininity as “irrevocably tied to smooth and youthful-looking skin” (p. 259).

Embodiment, connected to the notion of aesthetic labor mentioned elsewhere in this paper, is a useful way to segue into Bourdieusian field theory, which undergirds this study’s conception of cultural capital as discussed in the following section. Bourdieu calls his theoretical
perspective constructivist structuralism or structuralist constructivism, problematizing agentic actions in a social space organized by social structures (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b, 1985, 1989). In her book chapter on “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity,” Bordo (1993b) cites Bourdieu (1977a) in describing how the body is a “practical, direct locus of social control” (Bordo, 1993b, p. 165, emphasis in original) in addition to being a text of culture: “[T]hrough table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices, culture is ‘made body,’ as Bourdieu puts it – converted into automatic, habitual activity” (p. 165, emphasis in original). Lawler (2004) identifies the idea of culture “made body” as Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which is a way of analyzing how social relations become constituted within the self, but also how the self is constitutive of social relations… Habitus is manifest in styles of standing and moving, taking up space, in ways of speaking (idioms, as well as accent), in styles of dress, and so on… It is not, however, confined to the body since it also consists of series of dispositions, attitudes and tastes. (p. 111)

Simpson and Pullen (2018) explain that habitus “gives rise to possible ‘position taking’ within a particular context or ‘field’, with some positional forms seen as more desirable than others” (p. 180). Feminism becomes relevant when understanding positional form to mean social status. From a feminist perspective, the embodiment approach “stresses that the [gendered] body is the starting point of any interaction, as it frames the interaction before two people even begin their social exchange” (Perrott, 2016, p. 4). Ridgeway (2009) explains how this framing establishes or perpetuates a social inequality:

The content of our gender stereotypes shows the characteristic pattern of status inequality in which the higher status group is perceived as more proactive and agentically competent… and the lower status group is seen as more reactive and emotionally expressive (p. 149)

As Skeggs (2004b) explains, embodiment, habitus, and inequality are brought together through the notion of capital:
The habitus is the embodiment of the accumulation (or not) of value given by the volume and composition of the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic), displayed as dispositions, which sometimes for Bourdieu are aligned with social positions but sometimes are not. (p. 85)

**Social capital and exchange.** Duffy (2017) succinctly describes the Bourdieusian concept of capital:

the 'three fundamental guises' under which capital may appear: *economic*, which translates directly into financial wealth; *cultural*, which corresponds to educational qualifications and intellect; and *social*, which can exist as a title of nobility but often reflects relational networks – all of which are more or less convertible to others. (p. 22, emphasis in original)

The convertibility of capital suggests a metaphoric economy where, according to Skeggs (2004b), “objective forces somehow shape a logic based on exchange-value in which the habitus always works with a perception of future value and accumulation” (p. 85). Originally articulated by Homans (1958), social exchange theory considers social behaviors as an exchange of goods. Drawing on Skeggs’ (1997) definition of social exchange theory, Perrott (2016) explains that, stemming from Bourdieu’s notion of capital,

- gender, class and race provide a lens in which different forms of cultural and social capital become valued. The historical and cultural construction of gender then becomes pivotal in how men and women are viewed in respect to their social interactions. (p. 3)

Essentially, two parties approach a social interaction with a certain amount of capital, which may or may not be equal. The interaction proceeds with a series of exchanges of that capital and the ultimate outcome of the interaction is based on the efforts of either or both parties. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) note that outcomes based entirely on the efforts of one or the other party do not “imply a social exchange, as such. This is because an exchange requires a bidirectional transaction—something has to be given and something returned” (p. 876).

McCall (1992) brings up a question important to address in the context of this study: why isn’t there ‘gender capital’? Bourdieu (1984) remarked that
[s]exual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity; a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions. (p. 106)

Bourdieu, according to McCall (1992), regarded gender as a “secondary principle of organization” because it is hidden yet universal and pervasive. In light of McCall’s assessment, Skeggs (2004a) notes that embodied gender capital is, in Bourdeiu’s conceptual apparatus, symbolic capital, a hidden form of cultural capital. For the purposes of this study, gender, as performed agentically by women workers, will be considered a form of embodied cultural capital, as the cultural implications of gender shape social interactions with both colleagues and clients in gendered industries.

**Embodied cultural capital and aesthetic labor.** It is helpful here to connect the concepts of embodied cultural capital and aesthetic labor, as well as the related concepts of emotional labor and body work. These concepts are united in their grounding in the idea that self-presentation carries communicative value – that bodies are texts which are made intelligible through shared sociocultural structures.

Two concepts, body work and emotional labor, relate to a social actor’s agency in cultivating their self-presentation (Mears, 2014). Body work is the unpaid work done to modify one’s own body (Gimlin, 2007). In the context of gender, this can look like changes in diet or exercise regimen undertaken by a woman in an attempt to achieve the ideal thin feminine body. Emotional labor is the active management of affect so as to appear to feel or be a certain way (Hochschild, 1985; Wharton, 2009). Female executives may engage in emotional labor when navigating the challenge of maintaining authority over employees without being perceived as a “bitch.” Scholars of gender have argued that women do the lion’s share of body work and emotional labor due to the attainability of cultural ideals; that is, women experience more
pressure to be “perfect” and have to meet higher standards to do so (Mears, 2014). Thus, they invest more time and energy into body work and emotional labor than do men.

Embodied cultural capital consists of cues written onto the body (Mears, 2014). Extending this Bourdieusian term to include gender, race, and sexuality as well as class, feminist perspectives inform how these identifiers contribute to social inequalities (Perrott, 2016; Ridgeway, 2009). In a society where maleness and straightness are privileged over femaleness and queerness, a straight-passing man would enjoy a substantial amount of embodied cultural capital. Body work and emotional labor can contribute to embodied cultural capital; for example, men can attempt to manipulate their wardrobe and/or effeminate personality traits in order to pass as – be “read” as – a straight man. Regardless of whether the embodied cultural capital is achieved through purposeful body work and emotional labor, the straight-passing man has that embodied cultural capital.

Aesthetic labor appropriates embodied cultural capital for commercial gain (Mears, 2014). Aesthetic labor occurs first at the site of the individual, but employers can establish hiring practices based on aesthetic “fit” as a form of branding. These hiring practices are usually informal, and Mears (2014) argues that they border on discrimination. Aesthetic labor converts bodies into “repositories of value” (Otis, 2011, p. 179), wherein embodied cultural capital is converted to economic capital.

In summary, the present study’s theoretical framework is grounded in the idea that one’s multiple, intersecting identities are consciously and unconsciously enacted through and constituted by minute, perhaps seemingly insignificant actions coded according to the (usually shared) cultural understandings of the actor and observer. Assuming that certain identities are afforded more privilege than others depending on the circumstances (Bordo, 1993a), the study
conceptualizes gendered privilege as a form of cultural capital which influences the performance of professionality. In the case of masculinized industries like the tattoo industry, professionality is typically measured in relation to conformity to hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in (consciously or unconsciously) navigating their performance of gender by acts coded as feminine or masculine, tattooers simultaneously navigate their performance of professionality.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

At its core, this project sought to build upon previous scholarship in sociology, psychology, and feminist and organizational studies to produce a deep, nuanced understanding of gender performativity in the workplace by bringing women’s perspectives to the fore of this inquiry. In service of this goal, the primary method of investigation was the semi-structured interview. The following section details how participants were recruited, the interview process and method of analysis, closing with a discussion of feminist epistemologies on objectivity.

Participants

Potential participants were identified through personal networks and search engine inquiries. From these resources I was able to compile a list of women tattooers and gather their contact information. Participants were recruited primarily by email. In all, nine women were interviewed from a range of U.S. cities. Of these women, two self-identified as women of color, and at least two identified as LGBTQ.\(^1\) Most had been tattooing for 10 or more years, though some still considered themselves new to the industry.

Participants were given pseudonyms for use in notes, transcripts, and any documentation or publication of interview material. In the following chapters, participants are referred to by those pseudonyms. Where relevant, a participant’s location will be included for reference. Most

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\(^1\) No one was asked to disclose their sexuality, and some participants who may identify as LGBTQ might have opted not to share that information.
participants were based in prominent cities where the population of tattoo artists is large enough to make identification of participants highly unlikely. In the cases where participants were located in more sparsely populated cities or towns, their locations are reported in less specific terms.

Interviews and Analysis

As Rakow (2011) notes, feminist scholars have found interviews “particularly appropriate for understanding the experiences and meanings associated with gender, race, and class” (p.417; see also Hesse-Biber, 2011). Interviews, Rakow (2011) contends, appeal to critical and cultural scholars because of the researchers’ starting assumptions about the nature of reality (not external to and independent of the human knower but the product of human meaning-making) and the appropriate means by which we can know the world (not through deductive reasoning and the discovery of cause and effect relationships but through inductive insights from the subjective experiences of human actors). (p. 417)

In other words, interviews allow the researcher to access unique lived experiences in order to locate new knowledge that otherwise might remain hidden, especially if those experiences have been lived in/by marginalized bodies (e.g., women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, etc.) (Hesse-Biber, 2011).

Only one interview took place in person. The rest were conducted via phone or video conference. Several participants were interviewed while they were in their shops, but some participants were in their homes and one was in her car. Interviews were semi-structured, loosely following a general interview guide that covers key topics and themes. The interview guide included questions that were asked of each interviewee, but also left “room left for spontaneity on the part of the researcher and interviewee” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 116). For example, if a certain question was yielding particularly rich data, I, like Duffy (2017), probed further and asked follow-up questions not included in the interview guide. If a participant
answered a question vaguely, I followed Harrell and Bradley’s (2009) suggestion and probed for more detail or clarification. Questions on the interview guide were worded differently and/or asked in a different order for each participant, and the interview guide evolved over the course of data collection as themes emerged (Hesse-Biber, 2011; see Appendix A for complete interview guide).

Most interviews lasted around 40 minutes, though some were as long as 90 minutes. Each of the participants agreed to have their interview recorded. Because of this, I could fully engage with the participant and worry less about taking copious notes. I was able to absorb more than the participant’s words (e.g., their facial expressions, body language) and maintain a conversational cadence to facilitate rapport and allow for a relaxed, friendly atmosphere in which the participant felt comfortable sharing their experiences. I found that the best way to elicit responses relevant to this project was to describe one of its central concepts, aesthetic labor, early on in the interview.

I transcribed each interview upon completion. Transcriptions were not “cleaned” of crutch words or hesitations in order to preserve the participant’s voice. DeVault (1990) illustrates the analytic value of this practice by recounting how the phrase “you know” functioned as a “request for understanding” rather than a “stumbling inarticulateness” (p. 103). “In many instances,” she elaborates, “‘you know’ seems to mean something like, ‘OK, this next part is going to be a little tricky. I can’t say it quite right, but help me out a little; meet me halfway and you’ll understand what I mean’” (p. 103). While some responses were not particularly concise or eloquent, they were transcribed as the participant said them so these types of insights would not be lost.
In this study, most participants used “you know” quite liberally; it usually indicated the participant was thinking. When participants were “requesting understanding,” they more often asked, “Do you know what I mean?” They also used “um,” “uh,” and “like.” Including these words and phrases did not lead to any particularly interesting insights in this case, but interview data is still presented as transcribed. This illustrates congruence in speech patterns among participants as well as between myself and participants.

Scholars have referred to the next step in the interpretive analytic procedure in a variety of ways; most familiar, perhaps, is Stuart Hall’s oft-cited “long preliminary soak” in the data (Hall, 1975, p. 15). As Luker (2008) puts it, “We [as researchers] pore over our field notes or transcripts or historical-comparative data until we can recite them in our sleep” (p. 199). Luker outlines an iterative analytic process during which the researcher looks for patterns in the data, writes memos, and speaks to other scholars while constantly consulting theoretically and empirically relevant literature – such as the material that precedes this chapter. Analysis starts the moment the first interview begins, and each additional interview “refines our sense of what is going on” (p. 199). Kreiss (2016), for his study of media and politics, describes similarly “living with [his] data” and moving “back and forth between … inductive analysis of [interview-based] accounts and the theoretical tools of various literatures to develop the narrative and categories” (p. 233). The approaches described here provided a model for my analytic method.

**Feminist Epistemologies**

Diefenbach (2009) raises concerns about the “downsides” (p. 877) of subjectivity of the researcher, lack of generalizability, potential for conscious and unconscious biases, and influences of “dominant ideolog[ies and] mainstream thinking” (p. 882) that supposedly accompany interviews and qualitative research more broadly. But, as many scholars have pointed
out, qualitative research adheres to different standards than quantitative research, championing accuracy and depth of knowledge over replicability and generalizability (Becker, 2001; Luker, 2008; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Indeed, some scholars have found their relationship to their research subjects, their insider’s perspective or privilege, to be advantageous in some circumstances, affording them access to spaces they might not be welcome in otherwise (Baca Zinn, 2001; Chavez, 2008) and assuaging uneasy interviewees (Perrott, 2016).

Additionally, feminist and other scholars argue that “the notion of an objective and neutral researcher is no longer considered viable, while a critical self-reflection about the researcher’s subjectivity and relation to the project is considered appropriate, if not obligatory” (Rakow, 2011, p. 422, emphasis in original; see also Baym, 2009; Luker, 2008). I practice this critical self-reflection, or “reflexivity,” as it is referred to elsewhere (e.g., Hesse-Biber, 2011), by assessing and disclosing my positionality, acknowledging how it may shape data collection and analysis, and actively mediating that impact.

Harding (1993) asserts that the practice of reflexivity and consideration of one’s standpoint produces a “strong objectivity” (p. 49). Value-neutral objectivity, she says, “has not been ‘operationalized’ in such a way that scientific method can detect sexist and androcentric assumptions that are the ‘dominant beliefs of an age’” (p. 52). Instead of approaching research with the intent to simply erase all trace of subjectivity, of personal interest, objectivity is “maximized” (p. 52) in understanding how one’s own underlying subjective beliefs interact with the subjective beliefs of others and incorporating that understanding into the research process.

I was able to connect with most participants on the basis of gender, race, and class congruity as well as feminist inclinations regarding women’s equality in the workplace (Mifflin, 2013; Riessman, 1987). This was not always the case, but whether the participant’s views
aligned with mine or not, I tried to keep my responses neutral, indicating that I was listening with intermittent backchannel cues, like “yeah,” “sure,” and “OK.” The participants were heavily tattooed, and though I am also tattooed, mine are not visible unless I am wearing a bathing suit, and I would not consider myself an insider in the tattoo community. Although participants couldn’t see my tattoos, I allowed them to make their own judgments about my insider or outsider status based on my demonstrated knowledge of the industry. In some instances, participants assumed I was significantly less knowledgeable than I am, carefully explaining basic aspects of the industry (the apprenticeship model, for example). In retrospect, I’ve wondered if this would have been the case if I had visible tattoos or more elaborate facial piercings, as many of them did. Would they have been as thorough in their explanations? While beyond the scope of this study, I find this to be an interesting line of inquiry, given that appearance factors so heavily into my theoretical framework.
CHAPTER 4:
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing this study’s findings, it should be noted that professionalism is not something participants performed at certain points during a business transaction. Every interaction with a client or fellow tattooer provides an opportunity to display professionalism, and there may be things that participants do unintentionally that impact others’ impressions of their professionalism. What follows focuses on what participants do intentionally to display professionalism and interprets those actions through the lens of the framework articulated in Chapter 2.

This chapter first addresses industry standards of professionalism and the performance of belonging and professionalism in what participants identified as the most intimidating work environment: tattoo conventions. It then addresses how participants demonstrate professionalism during interactions with customers.

**Industry Standards and Tattoo Conventions**

“So, like, when you go to a convention, you can always seem to find each other at the airport. ... Like, you can spot another tattooer, ’cause usually, like, when you go to a tattoo convention, you see, like, a lot of heavily tattooed people. People with their face tattooed and their hands tattooed and stuff. And, uh, you can just kinda tell, like, ‘Oh, they’re probably tattooers.’”

- Ginger

While other industries may observe a standard dress code (e.g., business casual in office environments, uniform tops among waitstaff at restaurants), the tattoo industry doesn’t have any formal standards in regards to clothing or appearance. Tattooing doesn’t necessitate any particular garments for health or safety reasons (e.g., hairnets in food preparation, sturdy work
boots in construction) or any particular physique (e.g., thinness for models or dancers, fitness for athletes). Ostensibly, anyone can become a tattoo artist. Yet, participants in this study said they have observed informal industry standards over the course of their careers. Adhering to these standards equips an artist with a base level of cultural capital when approaching an interaction; they can be confident that they are easily identifiable as a tattooer, and may expect to be shown the regard due to a knowledgeable service provider.

Most participants became tattoo artists after feeling unhappy or unfulfilled in other occupations. Genevieve, an artist based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, worked in corporate settings before opening a tattoo shop with an artist she had gotten to know while he tattooed her. As a co-owner, Genevieve acted as business manager while her partner handled the tattooing. When she later began her apprenticeship, she felt like she looked out of place.

Genevieve: Um, and I think especially, like, for me in particular, coming into the industry the way I did, um, that was something that, I don’t necessarily want to say I struggled with, but definitely something that I, um, there was, there was a lot of thought around.

Interviewer: Right.

Genevieve: Or a lot of, maybe, maybe a little bit of struggle, I mean, um, just in the sense that, like, I absolutely didn’t look the part when I started. I had a couple of tattoos, um, and certainly not big ones and certainly not visible ones. Um, I still looked very, um, very young. Um, very, just, like, kind of, uh, I don’t know, corporate-y? Or just like…

Interviewer: [laughs] Right.

Genevieve: …normal, you know, run of the mill. I didn’t have, you know, big plugs, I didn’t have crazy hair at the time. I did none of that, you know? Um, I had really spent my whole life conforming to this, like, academic and corporate structure.
Jamie, a Korean artist based in Los Angeles, recalled feeling similarly at the beginning of her career. Before she moved to the U.S. and started tattooing, she had worked as an accountant. With a change in location and career, she felt like she needed to change her appearance.

Jamie: So it was, like, really different vibe and there were, there were, like, like, very rare Asian? [laughs] So, so, like, people were, like, surprised to see me...

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jamie: ...at the tattoo shop? And they were, like, I'm not a tattoo artist, I'm just, like, there for the reception.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jamie: So there, I know, like, there was my experience in the beginning. So I kind of try to get more tattoo because of that, to look more like a tattoo artist. And then I tried to dress, like, more cool. [laughs] Like, not just, like, you know, some, um, yeah. I just wanted to look more like artist-feeling so people think, like, “Oh, she knows some, like...”

Interviewer: Right.

Jamie: “She knows style and she might be, um, good at, like, design. Something cool.” [laughs]

Genevieve’s experience was almost nine years ago, and Jamie’s was more than 10 years ago, but pressure to look or act a certain way at work in order to “fit in” is still something many people experience during a work transition, regardless of industry (see, e.g., Evans, 2018; Hayes, 2018; Moore, 2017). It makes sense, then, that participants would notice and/or make an effort to conform to standards of appearance at the beginning of their careers in tattoo, especially if they had first worked in another industry. Leslie, an artist based in Atlanta who started her career in her teens, and Charlotte, an artist based in New York who had worked as a piercer for nine years before tattooing, never felt as though they needed to change their appearance to prove that they belonged in the industry or to be considered legitimate by other artists.
Even if they had felt pressure to look a certain way at the beginning of their careers, most participants said this was no longer the case. For Jamie, the change can be attributed to becoming a more established tattooer and, interestingly, the rise of Instagram.

Jamie: I think, like, the difference coming from my, um, experience and then, um, or so, my, because I was more known after a while, like, through Instagram and a lot of, you know?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jamie: Social network. So, people who coming for me, they already know my work. So they are coming for my art so they, they are more respectful.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jamie: So at some point of my career, like, that kind of attitude from customer changed a lot because of that.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jamie: It’s more, like, because of my work and, um, um, because [laughs] because they, uh, already know me. [laughs]

Maya, an artist based in Asheville, North Carolina, elaborated: “I mean, image always has kind of a part in it, but I feel like especially with a format like Instagram, which most tattoo artists use, from what I’ve seen, um, your work’s front and center.”

Instagram’s role in participants’ performance of professionalism will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter; however, at this point, it is helpful to know what Maya meant by “your work is front and center.” While an in-depth analysis of participants’ Instagram profiles was not conducted as a part of this study, a cursory glance reveals that their feeds are composed almost exclusively of photos of tattoos they’ve done (see Appendix B). As Maya said, most tattoo artists use Instagram, and their profiles function like frequently updated, easily accessible virtual portfolios that allow other artists and potential clients to make judgments concerning professionalism before ever meeting the artist in person. In a way, the cultural capital that results
(or does not result) from those judgments supersedes the embodied cultural capital afforded by achieving the industry standard “tattoo look.” This would understandably take some of the pressure off of tattooers (of all genders) to display their professionalism through their appearance. Moreover, it suggests that cultural capital can have varying levels of value. While “looking the part” may factor into an artist’s perceived professionalism, participants thought it less important than what can be determined by browsing the artist’s Instagram.

Although participants felt that appearance wasn’t as important, it seems an ideal “tattoo look” does exist, which Hannah, an artist based in upstate New York, feels is perpetuated at tattoo conventions by artists who have attained celebrity status through tattoo reality TV shows.

Hannah: …it’s this whole thing of, like, tattooers and how they look and the tattoo look. Um, when you go to the big conventions there’s always just so much of that, you know?

Interviewer: Right.

Hannah: But usually it’s only in the zones where they’re like, “Here’s the Ink Master crew” and, like, that vibe, or, like, you know?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Hannah: Um, but, like, the majority, the majority of people I see are just wearing, like, a black graphic tee [laughs] and just, like, doing their thing, you know?

This indicates that the ideal “tattoo look” is related, at least to some degree, to mediated representations of tattooers. This is unsurprising, given the copious research that demonstrates the relationship between the media and the development and/or perpetuation of appearance ideals (see, for example, Luff & Gray, 2009 on the feminine thinness ideal as conveyed through teen magazines).
None of the participants felt comfortable describing exactly what this “tattoo look” entailed. Ginger, an artist based in Pittsburgh, characterized it as “colorful, different, edgy.” Charlotte was under the impression that it changes,

particularly in the, like, the last 10 years because people have been able to kind of, like, genre a little bit. You know? So certain, there’s, like, black workshops and there’s traditional shops and, and so it, yeah, definitely. It can be kind of club-ish. You can kind of, you can kind of see eight people enter a room and all sort of be in the same variations of an outfit kind of thing.

It should be noted that “looking the part” might only give an artist short-term embodied cultural capital – that is, capital viable during the initial interaction that loses value over time. Long-term embodied cultural capital, on the other hand, often increases in value over time.

Participants attained long-term embodied cultural capital primarily by means of emotional labor, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

While most participants acknowledged that there was an ideal “tattoo look,” few of them felt they succumbed to the pressure to conform to that look. “I’m not really that person,” explained Charlotte. Hannah echoed that sentiment:

I don’t know if I, besides having visible tattoos, you know, for me, personally, I don’t, I don’t, like, really adhere to, like, any of those standards. I just don’t play the game… I just shut myself off to that, like, whole vibe.

Participants’ belief that they are less influenced by “the game” than other artists, reminiscent of the third-person effect, suggests that participants view conformity for the sake of conformity as indicative of amateurism.

So, what does gender performativity have to do with the “tattoo look”? While simply being a woman no longer elicits skepticism about a tattooer’s skill, expressing femininity or being “girly” still presents a challenge. As mentioned in Chapter 2, large, visible tattoos are typically coded as masculine, while small, dainty tattoos, usually hidden by clothing, are coded as feminine (Sanders, 2008), and Thompson (2015) found that heavily tattooed women are often
met with suspicion regarding their femininity. Most participants agreed, however, that having large, visible tattoos is an important part of the “tattoo look” and the performance of professionalism. Jamie explained, “tattoo artists would be better to get tattooed ’cause it’s good to know the feeling of getting tattooed.” Visible tattoos signal to clients and other artists that an artist knows what they’re doing. So, in order to be perceived as professional, a woman artist must have large, visible tattoos, which are also perceived as masculine. Genevieve admitted to being struck with this realization while being tattooed by “one of the gals down in Charlotte” who was “not super heavily tattooed, and like, very blonde, very cheerleader-y looking.”

Another gendered quality attached to the “tattoo look” is the “swagger,” a visual manifestation of what Hannah identified as “male ego,” which she said she encounters most frequently at conventions. Maya, who hasn’t been to a convention as a full-time tattooer, confessed she’s

Maya: …very intimidated by, um, male tattooists like, outside of this shop or in, male tattooists in that, in that sort of convention setting, I would be very nervous to talk to because of what, I’ve heard stories from other artists in this shop. It’s very performative.

Interviewer: OK.

Maya: There’s an aspect of, like, being performative. So people can be very, like, they, their egos can be really high… To find guys in this industry that don’t have an ego or have different priorities with what they think of success in tattooing…

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Maya: …is very rare. I’ve been lucky to work with a few at this shop because we vet, [laughs] male tattooists a little bit harder…

Interviewer: [laughs]

Maya: …to be honest with you.
Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: Because we need to.

Interviewer: Right.

Maya: There’s such, it’s, it’s one of those things that, I mean, they have a, pretty much whatever they do, sometimes, can just go completely unchecked.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: And it’s absolutely ridiculous. [laughs]

Interviewer: [laughs] Yes. 

Maya: But, um, definitely. ’Cause I feel like sometimes other tattooists, especially if you’re a female tattooist, like, can’t necessarily have the same sort of ego or swagger, otherwise you’ll be labeled as difficult or bitchy...

Interviewer: Right.

Maya: ...or whatever negative thing that if you were a guy it would be a positive thing.

Performing femininity can also have its advantages and can translate into embodied cultural capital. Charlotte explained:

If you look very feminine and you act feminine and you, you like, not necessarily, it doesn't have to be sexual attention, but if you, if you just find all the men to be fascinating and fabulous, you’re gonna, it’s gonna, you’re gonna have an easier time.

While the attention may or may not sexual, the embodied cultural capital is, and the performance of femininity that Charlotte describes relies on hetero-patriarchal power dynamics to work.

Several participants noted that they’ve encountered women tattooers in the industry who purposefully sexualize themselves, particularly at conventions. Charlotte pointed out that this is not exclusive to the tattoo industry: “I think that happens everywhere, though. Unfortunately, … women that find that that’s the best way to sell, find value, you know, is to sexualize themselves.” She returned to the subject later, clarifying that “the women [tattooers] that are
overtly oversexual do not get taken seriously.” In other words, this sexual embodied cultural capital is short-term. Charlotte pointed this out, too:

Charlotte: My first concern is not, like, “Why are you doing this?” um, but, like, “Hey, how long will that last for you?”

Interviewer: Mmm.

Charlotte: There’s a timetable. [laughs]

Interviewer: Right.

Charlotte: From what we look like. You know? So, um, I guess for me my focus has always been to try to just be a better tattooer and, and then that would, at the end of the day, be the thing that helped me carry through.

The topic of sexual embodied cultural capital got Hannah wondering, “What... what kind of success are you looking for? You know?” For most of the participants in this study, success happens at the level of the client. For Maya, success lies in the personal connection she makes when she tattoos someone: “That personal connection and the art itself is more important to me than, like, big-name success or big-name recognition, I think.” For Genevieve, it’s in the moment when she knows a client loves their tattoo:

Like, them standing up and looking in the mirror and it being exactly what they wanted or better than what they wanted. Um, and they just love it. You know? That's so gratifying, um, to be able to, to do that for somebody.

For Charlotte, success means she’s “perceived [by clients] as a trustworthy person.” For Leslie, it’s “mak[ing] tattoos that you love with clients that you love.” Perhaps it is to be anticipated, then, that across the board, participants insisted they communicated their professionalism to clients primarily through personal interaction.

Client Interactions and Personal Touches

“It all comes down to the work that you’re doing and the care that you’re giving clients. That’s what’s gonna keep people coming back to you, refer you to other people.”

- Hannah
This section is organized to walk through an artist’s business transaction with a new client, from initial client inquiry to consultation and scheduling to the actual tattooing. Before beginning, let’s return, briefly, to the concept of “male ego” mentioned in the previous section. In this case, “ego” may be best understood as entitlement: an expectation of special treatment even if it is undeserved or unwarranted. By identifying this entitlement as “male,” participants were not implying causation, but correlation. That is, this sense of entitlement does not necessarily stem from identifying as a man; it results, rather, from the privileges and cultural capital afforded to masculinity, in the industry and in society more broadly, and because of this, participants most often encounter it in men. This “male ego” is not exclusive to the tattoo industry. For example, Whatley, Wasieleski, Breneiser and Wood (2019) recently documented a similarly gendered entitlement among students in academic settings. Hannah picked up on the prevalence of the issue: “I’d like to say, you know, in tattooing or in almost anything you’ve gotta prove it, but somehow people still just get by.”

Ridgeway’s (2009) assertion that social actors are “framed” by gender “before we know it” (p. 148), mentioned in Chapter 2, is particularly useful in explicating “male ego.” “Gender,” she writes, “typically acts as a background identity that biases, in gendered directions, the performance of behaviors undertaken in the name of organizational roles and identities” (p. 145). As participants noted, “male ego” does factor in to the performance of professionalism. Maya explained that in her experience, there are

Maya: …a lot of artists that only want to satisfy themselves because they see art as, like, I don’t know, they see it as their, their, their thing.

Interviewer: Yeah.
Maya: Like, “This is my piece.” And I’m like, with painting, you know, with a canvas, then that might be your piece. But with tattooing it’s our [Maya and her client’s] piece.

Interviewer: Right.

Maya: Because that’s just the nature of, like, that’s the nature of tattooing.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: It’s you and another person. And that’s why it’s so, that’s why it’s so beautiful, but that’s also why I feel like so many artists can have problems of, like, ego things.

This quote articulates what participants felt was the most crucial element of the performance of professionalism: cooperation. Graciously sharing control over the artistic process with the client, regardless of one’s own artistic ideals or relative skill. To do this, Hannah says, artists have to “check [their egos] at the door.” This might be difficult because once developed, ego and its resulting aura of authority are forms of short-term embodied cultural capital, and mediating ego for the sake of longer-term embodied cultural capital would require a certain level of awareness and diligent emotional labor. In recounting their tattooing process, however, most participants demonstrated how this can be done. It is important to note, though, that participants likely did not develop a “male ego,” as they did not have access to the embodied cultural capital that maleness affords.

**Client inquiries and relational labor.** Most research detailing industry structure and workplace environment (e.g., Mifflin, 2013; Sanders, 2008; Thompson, 2015) was conducted prior to 2010, and as a result, does not account for the recent effects of social media, specifically Instagram, which, according to *Inked Magazine*, “has caused the tattoo community to rethink nearly every aspect of the industry” (Preston, 2018, n.p.). In the words of one participant, Maya, “Instagram is everything.”
The tattoo industry has always had a unique employment structure. As independent contractors, tattooers don’t necessarily need a shop. They could technically work out of their own homes, and some do, though this practice is generally frowned upon “for sanitary reasons,” as Charlotte, an artist based in New York City, explained. While working in a shop doesn’t guarantee cleanliness, shops are typically held to standards established and monitored by health officials and, as a result, are trusted by clients. Before the internet and social media, there were two ways to view a tattooer’s previous work: encounter it in person – that is, see it on someone’s skin – or go to their shop and look at their portfolio. The process of getting a tattoo began with finding a shop, then choosing an artist and consulting in person.

As Hannah explained, this is no longer the case: “I think the whole, um, attitude of how people find tattooers also has changed, you know? How people are looking more for what they want and check style, Instagram and stuff like that.” In other words, the process of getting a tattoo now begins with finding an artist, usually through Instagram. Potential clients can search for a specific style of tattoo, such as watercolor or traditional, or for an area of expertise, such as botanicals or portraits. They can search specifically for women artists or artists of color. “Since Instagram has been around,” says Leslie. “I pretty much work off appointment only. So having, like, walk-ins is not really a thing. Having people not, um, having people just come to you for your style has definitely, um, worked as an advantage for me since I’ve been on Instagram.”

Instagram is more than just a virtual portfolio. It acts, in a way, like a word of mouth aggregator and disseminator. Each post supplies public documentation of a job well done, and each interaction is a chance to prove one’s professionalism. Maya commented on how she thinks Instagram has impacted the way reputation is established in the industry:
Maya: It tends to be, like, guys tend to, like, garner [word-of-mouth reputation] quicker. Especially in tattooing. So I think that it [Instagram] gives everyone else, like, the edge that they need.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: To build that reputation.

Other participants also noted that Instagram has opened up doors for all tattooers, regardless of gender, race, sexuality or artistic style, to generate a good reputation (without relying on conferences or tattoo magazines) and promote themselves directly to potential clients who are likely to be looking for them. According to Charlotte,

Instagram has been, like, a full equalizer in this industry in, in, in so many ways. Um, just, you know, access to people for… I think for client and for artist it’s been a game changer because, you know, for so long this was a white boy’s club of “this is how you tattoo, this is what good tattoos are, these are the kind of tattoos you should get, these are the way you should get them.” And, um, you know, it’s given people an opportunity to be like, “that’s not what I like, that’s not what I want, that’s not how I want my body to look, this isn’t how I want to be treated when I get tattooed.” And it’s given clientele and artists alike [the chance] to sort of, you know, you know, really tailor their business completely individually.

Instagram also provides an opportunity for self-branding (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011). This is what differentiates the platform from shop websites, which have been in use longer. Artists can showcase what distinguishes them from other artists, in terms of artistic style or personal character, more easily and effectively than a traditional portfolio or website. Cultivating a personal brand requires regular activity and implementation of marketing strategy, but this brand, this “online identity” (Senft, 2013, p. 346), often translates directly into client inquiries, and thus economic capital. Maya, for one, has honed her strategy over the course of her three-year career.
Maya: I would say, like, 75-80 percent of my new clientele comes from finding me on Instagram or finding the shop on Instagram and then following me. And then, like, how much activity I post definitely makes a big difference. Like, keeping up with their algorithm to make sure that my profile’s fresh, and using, like, stories and sharing, personal, like, small personal things or anecdotes and stuff.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Maya: Makes a huge difference in, like, people following and continuing to follow you.

Maya said she’s recently made a point to share more “personal things” on her professional Instagram. The intersection between the personal and professional is a potential site of conflict for participants. For Leslie, a professional profile focuses almost exclusively on the artist’s work:

I just look at it more as a platform to show my work, not... I’ve sort of, like, changed away from getting so personal. I just really, um, sort of try to move away from just being so open on the internet. Like, I show, like, little things here and there. But, um, I’m more trying to sell my tattoos than I am trying to sell myself.

This outlook suggests that for Leslie, personal intimacy has no place in virtual presentations of professionalism. In creative industries, however, complete separation of one’s professional life from their personal life is almost impossible, because being an artist is often a huge part of an artist’s personal identity (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015).

For Maya, providing glimpses of her private life helps to lay the groundwork for strong client relationships:

I’ve been trying to share just a little bit, and then, um, it’s kind of interesting, ‘cause some of my clients, they’ll be like, “I saw this post and I like, you’re, you know, somewhere, you were playing this video game or you’re reading this book that you posted about and I’ve read it too.” So it’s kind of been nice, like, if we’re meeting for the first time, a little conversation starter.
In creating a tattoo for a client, Maya finds a reciprocal relationship, one where she gets to know the client and the client gets to know her, to be the most productive and gratifying. From this perspective, it becomes a professional obligation to be open about personal details online.

Whether an artist chooses to share personal details on their professional profile or not, the choice, and maintenance of that choice, can be considered emotional labor. Baym’s (2015) concept of relational labor, seems to fit this situation nicely. Relational labor is regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work. “Relational” is meant to emphasize effort that goes beyond managing others’ feelings in single encounters, as is usually the case in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), to creating and maintaining ongoing connections. (p. 16)

Baym (2015) developed this concept with social media in mind. While the relational labor performed on/through Instagram could also be performed in person, Instagram allows each act of labor to reach an audience rather than an individual. For example, most of Maya’s hobbies involve pop culture – she’s into comics, movies, and video games. While she certainly talks about these things with clients in person, talking about them online lets potential new clients know not only that she enjoys drawing and tattooing pop culture-related designs, but that she has specialized knowledge when it comes to pop culture:

It can make a big difference. Like, it’s between, you know, Googling images [of something pop culture-related] and being like, “Oh, I know the whole back story of this, you know, object and can make kind of a more authentic sort of design because I know everything about it.”

The benefits of being open about “personal stuff” online are twofold: First, as discussed above, it lays the foundation for a reciprocal relationship with any new client, an important aspect of Maya’s performance of professionalism. Second, it results in clients seeking her out specifically for pop-culture tattoos, which she loves to do.

What is gendered about this business philosophy, and how does it relate to the nexus between performance of gender and performance of professionalism? The sharing of personal
details at any point in the business transaction, or in any capacity, online or off, can be interpreted as feminine emotional vulnerability within the traditional gender role binary. Conversely, the deliberate withholding of personal details can be interpreted as masculine emotional detachment. Plenty of people capitalize on sharing personal details on Instagram; almost 85% of these “social media influencers” are women (Guttmann, 2019). As mentioned in Chapter 2, influencers cultivate their online persona and personal brand in order to promote products and services for other brands by leveraging their authority as a trend-setter. They share, for example, that they struggled to get pregnant for months before they found a bracelet that monitored their temperature and alerted them at the exact moment they began to ovulate. They talk about why they love a particular clothing brand and what beverage they consumed after their workout.

Participants, on the other hand, use the platform to promote their own services, and this promotion may or may not involve the (potentially painstaking) construction of an online persona. They may or may not talk about their hobbies or families. If they publicize a charity event at their shop ($50 flash, proceeds going to an animal shelter, for example), they may or may not share why the cause is special to them. Creating and maintaining an Instagram profile is, as many participants stated, part and parcel of being a modern tattoo artist. Professional consequences notwithstanding, the decision to share personal details is a demonstration of vulnerability which social media users are socialized to view as feminine.

Instagram’s role in a business transaction with a new client is pretty much confined to the beginning of the tattoo process. The remainder of this section focuses on individual (one-on-one) and/or in-person interactions between the artist and the new client. Before closing this discussion of Instagram, however, it must be noted that social media is not a completely democratic space.
Algorithms act as intermediary forces which dilute the agency of content producers and consumers and ultimately control narratives of gender, race, class and power (Noble, 2018). While algorithmic bias is outside the scope of this study, relational labor and performative acts carried out via Instagram are part of the story here; revelations by scholars and practitioners about bias in artificial intelligence suggests they are perhaps less effective as tools to garner cultural capital in the industry than participants may hope.

Consultations and booking. Once a client approaches an artist about being tattooed, the artist initiates the consultation and booking process. While this process also usually occurs online, these interactions are not available to a broader audience. These interactions are also opportunities to convey professionalism to clients. Leslie makes sure her email communication is straightforward and efficient: “The booking process is definitely where you make, you know, a really good, just, you know, I'm very professional with that, like, just as far as talking to clients, emails, just how I handle my business.” Maya said she finds conveying professionalism through email to be difficult. Again, she feels her personality is central to her professionalism, but she finds email, and text-based communication in general, to be too “rigid” to accurately express her personality or get a feel for the client’s personality, making it hard to build the connection that a cooperative design process relies on. It also takes much more effort on her part to make sure she knows what the client wants:

Maya: Sometimes, you know, I definitely have established appointments, drawn stuff up, and then they come in and they’re like, “oh, I wanna this this and this.” And, like, that's totally cool, um, but there's like a, a place to, like, if people wanna add, so like have that open communication ahead of time. Which is hard to do in an email. Like, in a personal consult people can just be like, "these are all the things I want" and...
Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: ...you know, you’re there with them...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: ...and you can have a little bit more in-depth conversation about, like, people tend to say more, like, why they want, or what they want, or, you know, the intention behind it.

From Instagram to email to in-person exchanges, emotional and relational labor contribute considerably to participants’ performance of professionalism. Embodiment comes into the picture most noticeably during in-person interactions, and even though the initial client inquiry, consultation and booking processes might occur online, tattooing necessitates that the artist and client meet in person during the tattoo appointment, if not before then.

**Tattooing.** Most participants felt that their appearance definitely factors in to client perceptions of professionalism. When meeting a client in person, especially if it’s the first time, Maya tries to show off her tattoos as much as possible.

Maya: People like looking at artists’, like, tattoos. Like, their own. Like, their work that they have.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Maya: So it’s much easier to, like, wear clothing that kind of, like, like tank tops so your arms are showing so you, you know, you can show off the work you have, um, in, like, spring, summer, into fall, since it’s pretty mild here.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: But winter can be a little bit harder ’cause I tend to be bundled up.

Interviewer: Yeah. [laughs]

Maya: And people are like, “How many tattoos do you have?” [laughs]
Maya: Because that tends to be a thing, too. Um, I’ve found out from clients that, clients tend to trust tattooists with more tattoos ’cause they’ll be like, “Oh, you have a tattoo in that area, too, that I’m about to get tattooed. How did it feel for you?” [laughs]

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: I’ve found that, definitely especially after getting tattooed in some, like, my ribs, you know, being able to have, like, say, like, “Hey, I was tattooed on my ribs and this was my experience.”

Interviewer: Right.

Maya: Um, I feel like it builds a little bit more trust between the two of you. And, so if you can see that visually, with an outfit, you know, have on, like, a T-shirt and shorts, and someone can just, like, look at you head to toe and be like, “Oh, she's tattooed in all these places.” I think it helps. [laughs]

Interviewer: Yeah. Um, so you definitely consider, like, the client when you’re, like, putting an outfit together for the day.

Maya: Definitely. [laughs]

In discussing her clothing choices, Charlotte weighed the benefits of displaying her tattoos against the risk of receiving unwanted sexual attention.

Um, I am very volumptuous [sic]. You know? I, have, I, you know, I have large lips and I’m a double-D chest. … So I think went out of my way, um, to be more covered up. And, and I tend to, whilst my artwork is very feminine and while I, I enjoy, I love being a woman and I identify strongly in that, you know, womanly sense, uh, I definitely have moments of more perceived masculinity.

Masculinity, here, deserves further exploration. As discussed in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, being heavily tattooed is traditionally coded as masculine. Displaying one's tattoos, then, would be a masculine performance. Charlotte, however, feels more masculine when she shows less skin. While these understandings of masculine presentation might seem conflicting, presenting as more masculine seems to be part of professionalism in both cases, and both cases involve body work. For Maya, having more tattoos and showing more skin builds the trust
necessary for a strong relationship with the client. For Charlotte, showing less skin reduces the chances that she will be sexualized so that she will be taken seriously.

Participants’ aesthetic labor did not apply just to their appearance. A substantial amount of emotional labor goes into maintaining the shop environment. At Maya’s shop, they pride themselves on the safe and inclusive space they’ve cultivated.

Maya: Most of our clientele, um, tend, it, since we've kinda garnered, like, a safe, sort of space, most of our clientele tends to be, like, female, or, like, nonbinary, or, you know.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Maya: People who might not necessarily come in to, it, like they wouldn't come in to every tattoo shop, like, any tattoo shop.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: So having that, like, safe space, you wanna make sure everybody that works there is on board with that.

Ego, Maya said, often gets in the way of a safe and inclusive atmosphere. That’s one reason why they “vet male tattooists a little bit harder,” as mentioned in the previous section.

Other participants felt similarly about creating safe and welcoming environments to distinguish their shops from conventional shops. “I think women in particular are really, right now, pushing back pretty hard with that and trying to create environments that, you know, it feels good to go to work in and it feels good to get tattooed in,” said Charlotte.
I feel like I, I have gotten kind of a good, you know, queer community brewing and it matters to me because I’ve seen so many people be excluded over the years. Um, you know, I want people of color to feel comfortable when they’re here. I want, you know, I just, I want my, this space to feel, I’m very focused on how you feel when you walk in the door and that you are not met with the standard feelings of walking into the, a, the usual tattoo shop. Which is, it’s usually aggressive, it’s usually intense. Um, you’re often made to feel like you need to jump through hoops or feel cool enough to, to be in that environment. And I see this as a luxury industry and a service industry. And, so I just feel like especially because of how it’s expanding, um, that that’s sort of really counterintuitive and insane to try to really, like, hold fast to that.

Charlotte was referring to the industry-wide transition from impersonal flash designs to majority custom work created for and with a specific client. Each project should be approached differently because each client is different. Ego can make it difficult to compromise artistic control, and this makes for a comparatively hostile environment for clients that are looking for a personalized experience. Genevieve spoke to this as well: “I don’t, I don't necessarily think that this is the space or I’m the tattooer for every single person. So I don’t ever push that. Which I think paradoxically speaks to professionalism.”

Maya also considers this attitude to contribute to professionalism. “If people, um, want kind of one thing or the other, they want something that's bold but feminine, I definitely can recommend them to two other artists, you know?” she said. “If they want something delicate and soft that's feminine, I got that.” In taking competition out of the picture, the artists in Maya’s shop can “focus more in the moment. In the moment with the client.” Other participants were of the same opinion: A professional tattooer is focused on the client rather than themselves or other artists. Ginger, for example, explained

I’m professional in the sense of, um, the client’s number one and, uh, their experience is, is the important thing in the shop, when they’re in the shop in my space. And, um, to treat them with respect and know it’s like a, this is a mutual experience. It’s a shared relationship.
Professionalism demands that the artist cares about the client’s opinion and accepts that might make them vulnerable. Professionalism entails openness and transparency. Professionalism builds trust. “I try to be as transparent as possible in the beginning,” Charlotte said, um, so that we can have that dialogue and that they can feel that they are comfortable with my process and, and on board. And I think that that in turn gives people a lot of comfort, um, when they're about to do something that they're a little afraid of, that is permanent. … So I think, yeah, I think just by sort of including people in the way that I do things allows them to kind of give up a little bit of a ghost and trust me a little bit more.

Maya conveys professionalism by exuding a warm and honest confidence.

Maya: It’s, from what I’ve experienced, it’s having a certain confidence, and I think a friendliness helps. When someone walks in kind of being like, “This is how this process...” Especially if they're a first-timer. You know, really, like, walking them through everything. And being open to sharing information.

Interviewer: OK.

Maya: Because I feel like we have, there’s a lot of information. There’s a lot of little factors that goes into tattooing. So if you can kind of step into a room and, like, talk to the client, like, look at them, you know, eye to eye, and, you know, have this kind of, it’s like a combination of warmth, but also, like, “Let me take you on this journey. I am a, I am the, uh, you know, like, I have knowledge and I have experience and...”

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: “artistry, and I will escort you through this journey together and we will have a good time and...” [laughs]

Interviewer: Sure.

Maya: I feel like that’s the biggest thing, is like, the whole, it’s like a, um, demeanor. You know?

When asked what makes professional confidence different from egotistic confidence, Maya decided it was the artist’s intention.
Maya: Um, because tattooing, I always, in my mind, equate it to dancing. It’s a partnership. It’s you as an artist, and then client as artist as well.

Interviewer: Sure.

Maya: Because I feel like we have, there’s a lot of information. There’s a lot of little factors that goes into tattooing. So if you can kind of step into a room and, like, talk to the client, like, look at them, you know, eye to eye, and, you know, have this kind of, it’s like a combination of warmth, but also, like, “Let me take you on this journey. I am a, I am the, uh, you know, like, I have knowledge and I have experience and...”

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: And I feel like if your intention is to go into a tattoo or to partner up with a client and be like, “This is what I'm doing” as opposed to “What do you want? Let's figure this out together.” I feel like that makes the difference. Like, the ego is, ego, confidence and ego is more, you know, “This is who I am, this is my style, this is what I want to do.” As opposed to confidence but, like, treating your client as an equal. Like, “Hey, this is, you know, our design.”

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: You know? “This is us together, creating a piece of artwork.” You know? I think that’s, intention’s definitely what makes... It’s, it’s very subtle. [laughs]

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maya: But you can definitely tell.

Along those same lines, several participants mentioned that they view tattooing as a service. At the beginning of her career, Genevieve was focused mostly on how gratifying it was to be working in a creative capacity:
Genevieve: I think at the beginning I was just really excited to be doing something creative and it was cool and it was fun. Um, but very quickly in working with people and seeing, like, sort of the result and how that affected people, um, it really became more of, like, oh this is cool and fun and I get to be creative to like, this is a service. Like—

Interviewer: Yeah.

Genevieve: —I get to do those things, but this is a service and I’m in service to these people.

When considering traditional gender roles, work that “emphasize[s] affective performances associated with serving, assisting, or caring for others” (Mayer, 2014, p. 52) is not masculinized, but feminized work. Thus, for participants, it seems professionalism is more connected to performative femininity than performative masculinity. While appearing physically feminine may not increase participants’ embodied cultural capital, exercising a feminized demeaner does. It is difficult to know for sure if this association is accurate for male tattooers as well; it is possible professionalism is very different for men because they have different forms and levels of embodied cultural capital.

It should also be noted that because these participants are women, performing emotional labor and performing professionalism through traditionally feminine actions (nurturing client, sharing control) would be congruent with broader social norms. These feminine actions are likely less socially acceptable for men to perform, which may explain why Maya’s shop has such a hard time finding male artists that are willing to perform them.

Labor, Gender and Embodied Cultural Capital: Pulling It All Together

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this interview data reflects what participants intentionally do to moderate embodied cultural capital and communicate professionalism. Of course, intention is not the whole picture. Even the most mundane act can be an act of labor; we may labor at something so often that we no longer notice we’re doing it, if we ever noticed it at
all. For example, research shows that women habitually apologize more frequently than men (Schumann & Ross, 2010). Some posit this is a result of socialization processes that teach women to take up less space, physically, emotionally, and socially (Argintar, 2013; Chemaly, 2013; Crosley, 2015). Although over-apologizing may not be deliberate, each apology, each thing a woman does to take up less space, less of others’ time and energy, is indeed an act of labor. Routine labor is not insignificant, especially in the context of this study. Consider again Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which is “manifest in styles of standing and moving, taking up space, in ways of speaking (idioms, as well as accent), in styles of dress, and so on…” (Lawler, 2004, p. 111). An individual’s social identity is embedded in things they do without thinking, things that may or may not be intentional. Actively thinking about the things that we usually do without thinking takes a certain amount of self-awareness that is difficult to elicit from interview subjects who are not already self-aware; observational methods are better suited to this task. Because observation was not a formal part of this study’s method, I relied on participants to recount actions which may not have seemed significant to them, engineering questions that facilitated fuller accounts of their workplace rituals and behaviors. Ultimately, despite my best efforts, participants may not have noticed the gendered minutiae that are the foundation of their performative professionalism, and so did not share those minutiae with me.

In addition to self-awareness, it takes a level of social awareness to understand why seemingly negligible actions matter, both in the context of this study and in broader social discourse regarding gender inequity. One first must acknowledge that gender plays a role in every social interaction in order to recognize the actions which constitute gender. One participant, Ginger, had not achieved that level of social awareness. In fact, at the conclusion of her interview, she declared:
I just wanna make sure that it is, it is known, um, that I don’t want it to be gone without saying that, um, you know, like, there’s no, it has never mattered that I was a woman. It’s never mattered. And, uh, I’ve never been treated like it mattered and that means if it’s fair, it’s fair. Like, if you wanna compete, you’re competing against the men, too, and you, you don’t get any special treatment because you’re a woman. And I wasn’t harassed. … So, you know, I hear a lot, I was worried that there’d be a, you know, this connotation that, you know, as a woman tattooer you have so much extra work to do. No you don’t. Not in any job that I or you would have as a woman. If you work hard, you work hard, and nobody’s gonna give a shit about your gender. And it’s not gonna come up. And it’s not been something I’ve had yet to compete with.

Not only does this sentiment contradict the theory on which this study is built, it denies the lived experiences of working women in any industry. Ginger was the only participant that expressed these views; others were unequivocal that gender has affected their experience in an industry that has historically accommodated men and excluded women. In fact, Maya shared that she belongs to a Facebook group, “Female Tattoo Artists Unite!”, where hundreds of women tattooers offer support and encouragement to other women in the industry.

Ginger’s lack of social awareness is not necessarily indicative of ignorance. This statement, in conjunction with other comments peppered throughout her interview, suggest that she is well aware of gender inequity in her industry. Instead of actively working through any cognitive challenges this presents, she denies the existence of gender inequity in all facets of her life. Despite Ginger’s assertion that her gender has had no effect on her career, her defensiveness reveals additional emotional labor she does as a woman working in a male-dominated, masculinized industry. The following section briefly explores this form of emotional labor and discusses its relationship to embodied cultural capital.

**Not caring is caring: Denial and rejection as emotional labor.** Ginger expends energy convincing herself and others that gender doesn’t make a difference, not in her industry and not in “any job that I or you would have as a woman.” She approached her interview guardedly, asking questions that made it clear she was suspicious of me and my feminist perspective. For
example, towards the middle of her interview, she wondered why I thought women might be held to different appearance standards than men.

Interviewer:  … women are expected to wear makeup every day, just on a social scale, like, a big, grand scale. Um, and so that can be considered, uh, an extra, you know, 15-30 minutes of work that they have to do in order to be considered presentable in comparison to men.

Ginger:  Is that a, um, are you being taught that that’s a negative thing?

Interviewer:  No, it’s just a thing.

For the entirety of the interview, Ginger filtered her thoughts through her suspicion. In response to the example I gave about social expectations regarding makeup, she explained that while there is no expectation for her to come to work looking any certain way, she gets really bummed out when I don’t allow myself that time in the morning to put makeup on. Like, I hate it. I hate leaving the house with, going to work without getting, you know, my hair done and makeup done. Like, I feel so much better when I have makeup on, and stuff. … But there’s no external expectation of that of me. That’s, that’s in me.

It makes sense that Ginger feels better when she has taken the time to put on makeup given the association between makeup with beauty ideals (Cash, Dawson, Davis, Bowen, & Galumbeck, 1989; McCabe, de Waal Malefyt, & Fabri, 2017). Rather than interrogate the social factors that may influence her feelings, however, she denies that external social expectations exist at all. Denying that gender may have something to do with her own personal appearance standards allows Ginger not to care about external gendered expectations. It protects her from feeling disadvantaged or subjugated by her womanhood, in her job and in society more broadly.

Denial like Ginger’s can be considered a form of emotional labor. Another similar kind of emotional labor is exemplified by Hannah, who claimed that she “just [doesn’t] play the game.” Actively removing oneself from the “game” is a way of playing the game. Both Ginger’s and Hannah’s mindsets help them feel secure and in control over their professional reception, regardless of the ways others might interpret any embodied cultural capital they have that is built
upon gendered privilege. It is important to note, however, that refusing to acknowledge certain social factors influencing their work experience doesn’t mean that they don’t work within the confines of those social factors.

Ginger’s denial and Hannah’s rejection of external social expectations (“the game”) are distinctly different from what they and others meant when they said that their work should say everything that needs to be said about their professionalism. When participants said their work stands for itself, or that it should stand for itself, they were not referring solely to the art they produce, but their service as a whole. Denial and rejection inform what the participant considers important in their service and how those things are to be evaluated.

As mentioned above, denial and rejection are forms of emotional labor, and as such they may contribute to a participant’s embodied cultural capital. Ginger’s denial may translate to a confidence akin to male ego, where Ginger assumes no one cares about her gender and moves through initial client interactions as if that is the case. Hannah’s rejection of “the game” may lead to a similar confidence, which may affect a new client’s evaluation of her professionalism. Confidence is only short-term embodied cultural capital, however, and it may not remain a strong source of capital with new or returning clients for the duration of their business relationship.

The following section further fleshes out the concepts of long- and short-term embodied cultural capital, locating them explicitly within this study’s theoretical framework.

**Long- and short-term embodied cultural capital.** Most of what has been discussed in this chapter deals with an artist’s extended interaction or relationship with a new client. When asked about extended relationships – returning clients, clients-turned-friends, coworkers – participants noted that they relied less on physical presentation of their professionalism.
Returning clients know what it’s like to work with the artist. They’ve liked the service they’ve gotten and the tattoo(s) they’ve received. They may or may not remember exactly what their artist was wearing on the day they first encountered them and how it made them feel. The concepts of long- and short-term embodied cultural capital help distinguish between the capital that factors into an initial social interaction and the capital that factors into the duration of a social, or in this case, business, relationship.

To reiterate what was stated earlier in this chapter, short-term embodied cultural capital is the capital viable during the initial interaction that loses value over time. It is often immediately noticeable and may be discounted as “not important” by social actors. For example, appearance can be considered short-term embodied cultural capital when dealing in professionalism. In a more traditional workplace (i.e., an office), looking “put together” may be interpreted by new coworkers as a sign of vocational competence. As the working relationship moves forward, appearance will theoretically contribute substantially less to evaluations of competence. In the tattoo industry, having the “tattoo look” might attract clients, but it will not retain them. Some clients might choose to switch artists if they feel they would be better serviced elsewhere. Male ego can also be considered a form of short-term embodied cultural capital. The confidence and swagger that accompany male ego can elicit trust from a new client, who may surmise that the artist knows what they’re doing. After the client has been tattooed by the artist, swagger is a much less valuable form of embodied cultural capital, as the client has new information with which they can gauge the artist’s ability, their service, and their professionalism.

Long-term embodied cultural capital does not lose value over time, and may even accrue additional value as relationships move forward. Labor that goes into establishing a reciprocal relationship with a client – emotional vulnerability, for example – will continue to be fruitful for
as long as that relationship exists. The longer the relationship exists, the more economic potential it has. Just because certain embodied cultural capital may be longer-term than other embodied cultural capital, it does not necessary follow that that capital took less labor to produce. It simply means that the social actor will be able to continue to draw on that capital even after the initial social interaction has taken place, after a first impression has worn off.

Gender and gendered privilege play a complicated role here. In the theoretical framework of this study, gendered privilege is a form of embodied cultural capital. Gender doesn’t have to be “whole” to be privileged; its pieces, the individual gendered actions that comprise gender, are also subject to privilege within their culture of intelligibility. Generally speaking, in a patriarchal society, masculine actions are privileged over feminine actions, just as masculine-presenting people are often privileged over feminine-presenting people. In terms of capital, masculine actions yield more capital than do feminine actions. But can the embodied cultural capital produced by a single gendered action be long-term? Can a single gesture of emotional vulnerability result in a lasting source of embodied cultural capital for future social exchanges? Perhaps it is more beneficial to consider how a single gesture can affect the long-termness of the social actor’s emotional vulnerability, which is a trait established through a series of actions performed reliably.

There are additional questions raised in fleshing out the concepts of short- and long-term embodied cultural capital. In the context of this study’s theoretical framework, each action exists separately and as a piece of a whole. A social actor can be emotionally vulnerable during one interaction and emotionally reserved the next. Does the latter interaction negate the capital produced in the former interaction? The data collected for this project is helpful in illustrating what influences a woman tattoo artist’s baseline embodied cultural capital – the embodied
cultural capital that they possess as they enter into a social interaction – and what they do to leverage that capital or mitigate the absence of capital in the ensuing business interaction. The concepts of short- and long-term embodied cultural capital emerged rather late in the data collection process and no data was collected with these concepts in mind. Because of this, the data is limited in what it can contribute to the development of these theoretical concepts, and further research is needed to fully develop them and answer the questions outlined above.
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

This study synthesizes theories and concepts related to gender and labor, and embodied cultural capital to articulate a framework that allows for investigation into how gender, and the intentional and unintentional acts that comprise it, interacts with and shapes professional workplace behavior and business interactions. The study weaves together interviews with nine women tattoo artists as part of a bigger picture of professionalism in the masculinized tattoo industry, which may rely more on feminized acts of service than the performance of traditional masculinity.

The interviews illustrate that tattooers must navigate gender in their presentation of professionalism, from how they display their bodies to how they engage in personal interactions. While historically tattooers may have conveyed professionalism through authority and machismo, those traits are now perceived as childish and egotistic; according to these women, real professional tattooers treat their clients as equals and recognize that they might not be the right artist for every project or every person. With the industry-wide shift from flash to custom work, a cooperative, individualized design process makes sense, and this collaboration between artist and client entails navigation of gendered power dynamics. Artists are simultaneously professionals with expertise and service providers who must cater and defer to their client’s wants and needs.

Social media – in particular Instagram – has transformed parts of the industry in significant ways, restructuring the traditional business model to give the client more leverage
over both the individual tattooer and the industry as a whole (Preston, 2018; Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011). It facilitates an artist’s performance of professionalism through self-branding and relational labor. In person, artists manage their embodied cultural capital through body work and emotional labor with the goal of giving their client the best, most personalized experience possible and a tattoo they love.

This study makes several empirical and theoretical contributions. At the empirical level, it offers insight into professionalism in an industry that has received little attention from scholars of gender and work. It also informs a deeper and more current understanding of the performance of professionalism now that potential clients find artists primarily through Instagram. At the theoretical level, this study contributes to knowledge of the relationships between gender, body, labor, and professional identity. It introduces the concepts of short- and long-term embodied cultural capital. It also contributes to the body of literature on performativity and presentation of the self, and it integrates theories and concepts from various disciplines to develop a new way to approach the study of gendered work environments in other industries, whether masculinized or feminized.
EPILOGUE: MOVING FORWARD

There are many options for furthering this research. First, it must be noted that while this study intended to address race and class in addition to gender, most of the participants did not raise those subjects on their own, and when they were asked probing questions about race or class, the conversation rarely lasted more than a few exchanges. This is only mildly surprising given that only two participants were not White, despite concerted efforts to recruit artists of color. I am certain, however, that there is more to discover at the intersection of race, class, gender and professional identity. This represents perhaps the most important avenue of additional exploration.

Another obvious path forward includes interviewing male tattoo artists. Interpreted through the same theoretical framework, these interviews would provide further insight in a variety of contexts concerning gender inequity and the apparent feminization of professionalism in this industry. Have male tattooers observed such a change? If so, in what ways are they responding?

This study could also be expanded to account for other sources of embodied cultural capital, including dialect, age, weight, and level of education. Most of this study’s participants were based in urban areas. Maya said that there were some women tattoo artists in the Facebook group mentioned in Chapter 4 who were located rurally and who were the only woman tattooers in their area. There may be interesting differences in cultures of intelligibility across the urban/rural divide; for example, if there are fewer women tattooers, feminine presentation may
present challenges that urban artists feel they no longer encounter, and potential clients may make harsher judgments about the artist’s skill. These differences are worth looking into to create a fuller understanding of the industry as a whole.

One of the most promising avenues of inquiry concerns the role of Instagram in the tattoo industry. Its widespread use and its influence on the processes and structure of the industry have been topics of popular interest in the tattoo community (see Preston, 2018) and warrant further exploration from scholars, as there may be other industries similarly impacted by the platform. Several questions are raised: How often do tattoo artists create online personae through which they develop client relationships? Is there a measurable difference in number of followers? Does establishing a strong online presence predict that an artist is able to charge higher hourly rates? There are countless ways that this information can contribute to a better understanding of the industry, as well as where and how labor is performed during a business interaction.

It may also be beneficial to take a closer look at tattoo reality TV shows. Do tattooers that have achieved fame through these shows view professionalism differently than does the average tattooer? What about their conceptions of success and their understanding of self-presentation? Do these things differ based on the gender of the reality star? What, exactly, is the “tattoo look” that these stars ostensibly promote? What is the difference between fame gained through exposure on reality TV and fame gained elsewhere, through Instagram, for example?

It’s difficult to imagine an industry that combines artistic skill and service in ways similar to the tattoo industry. Other service industries certainly rely on skill, but do not have the same relationship to artistry and creativity that the tattoo industry does. The music industry has the artistic skill element, but the industry is not set up for musicians to generate income by writing songs for specific clients. However, labor, gender, and embodied cultural capital are not
exclusive to the tattoo industry, and this theoretical framework is a useful one to apply to other industries, both masculinized and feminized.
APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Tell me the story of how you got into tattoo.
What was your training process like?
   Did you complete an apprenticeship?
   Tell me about your mentor.
Who has tattooed you?
Have you always worked in this shop?
Tell me about the last tattoo you did.
Do you have any sort of specialty? Anything you really love to tattoo?
Who is a ‘typical’ client/customer? Tell me about the last time you worked with one.
Do you have any regular clients/customers?
Is there anything you wish clients/customers would know/do/think about you/tattooing?
Have you done anything to make your workplace ‘your own’?
Are you friends with your coworkers?
Tell me the weirdest/most frustrating thing that’s happened while you were working/tattooing.
What is the most/least gratifying part of your job?
Have you had any interactions/moments that really changed your perspective of your career?
Tell me about a time when you felt like your gender affected an interaction with an employer/coworker/client/customer.
What do you feel is the most important aspect of your identity as a tattooist?
Do you feel like you can be yourself at work?
What do you think it means to “look the part” of a tattooer?
Do you think you “look the part”?
Did you actively change your appearance in any way to “look the part”?
How much thought went/goes into those decisions?
Do you ever feel like you can’t express your femininity for any reason?
What do you wear on a typical work day?
Can you talk about your tattoos? Where they are, what they are, what they mean, and who tattooed them.
How do you think this shop is different because most/all of the tattooers are women?
Do you ever go to tattoo conventions? Do you change your appearance for these conventions?
Growing up, how did your family view tattoos and other forms of body modification?
How often do you use social media?
How does social media factor into your relationships with clients?
How do you feel about tattooers who gain notoriety through social media?
How do you think social media factors into a tattooers self-image or ego?
APPENDIX B:
A SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS’ INSTAGRAM PROFILES
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78


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