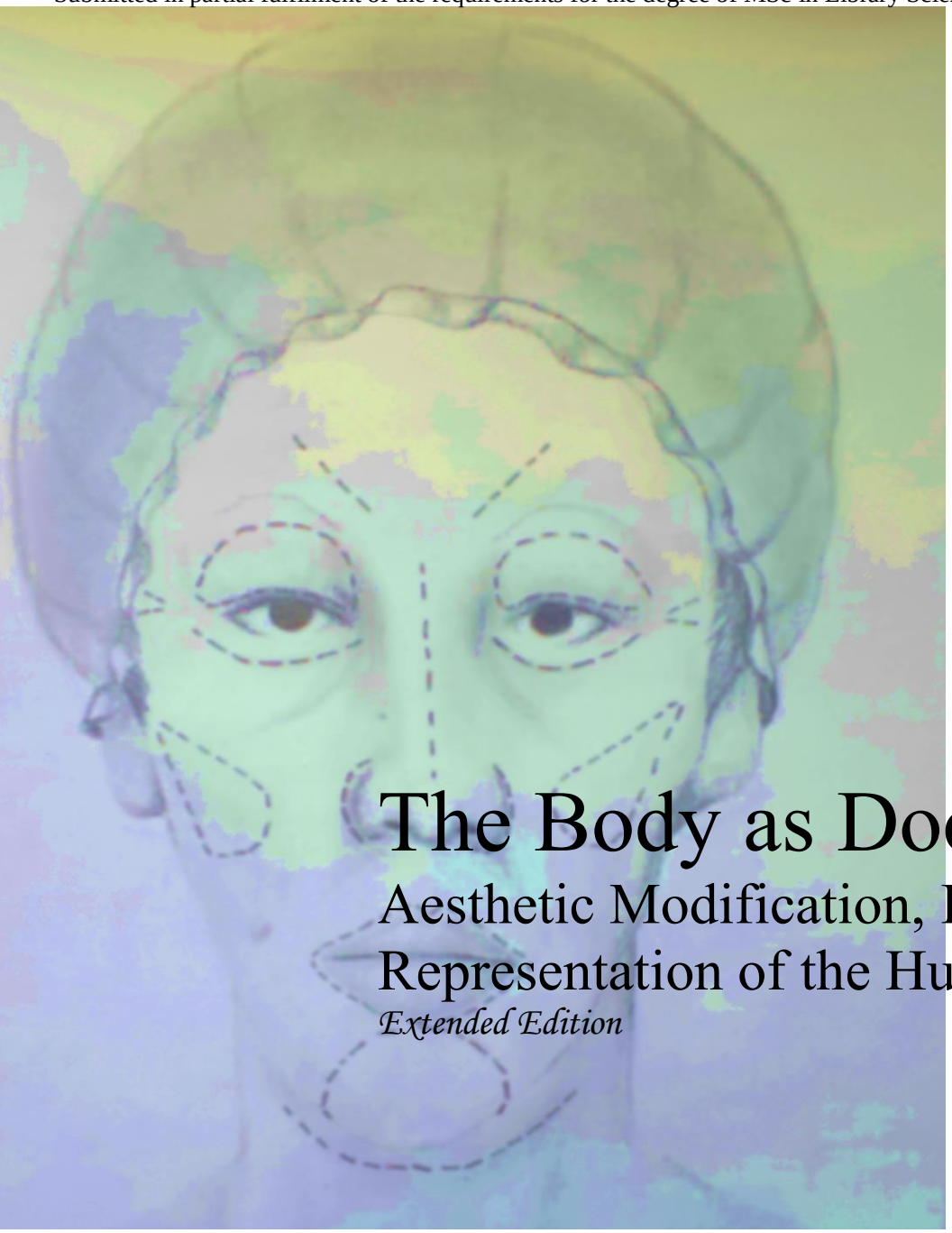
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The Body as Document:

Aesthetic Modification, Identity, and Representation of the Human Form

Extended Edition

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the intricate relationship between records, technology, identity, and society. Through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews to serve as case studies, it examines the impact of genetic records on personal identity and in preserving cultural heritage and identity, scrutinising the significance of familial record transparency and ethical considerations. Additionally, the study investigates the role of technology in shaping self-perception, highlighting the influence of digital avatars and online personas. As it ventures into future directions, this work addresses evolving ethical questions in gene editing, emphasising the importance of transparent familial records, and underscoring the need for research on technology's influence on mental health. It recognizes the dynamic landscape of body modification, the enduring importance of preserving cultural heritage, and the evolving dynamics of human-AI collaboration.

This dissertation unveils the profound impact of records on personal identity and societal well-being, highlighting the ethical responsibilities tied to records and technology, positioning records as active participants in the narratives of our lives. Understanding this relationship is crucial in navigating a rapidly changing technological and societal landscape.[1]

[1] Cover Image Source: Last, M. (Writer of this paper) Original artwork.2015. Available from maryhelenmack.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract....1
Table of Contents....2
Introduction: Decorate Temples, Edit Documents, Abuse Metaphors....6
Objectives....7
Significance and Contribution....8
Defining Documents....8
Documentality....9
What is a Document? Answer: Anything, Apparently....10
Delving So Deep It Gets Microscopic: Gene Coding....11
A Thought Experiment: On a Boat....12
Connecting Sailing Ships with Sails to Changing Cells with Continuity....13
"Editing"....14
Body Modification: Editing the Self....16
Hormone Therapies: What's the T(ea)?....17
Smart Casual Means Wearing Tailored Genes....18
Edit or Complete Re-Construction....19
The Body as Record: Micro Scale....19
DNA....19
Transmission of DNA as Record....19
Ownership of DNA....20
You're The Reason Our Kids are Ugly....24
Hipster Biologists Wear Skinny Genes....25
Hormone Treatments: Getting the T(ea)....26
CASE STUDY: ALEXANDER TASCHIOGLOU....26
The Body as Record: Macro Scale....28
Aesthetic Modification....29
Reconstruct....30
Express....31
Enhance....33
Affirm....36

Ritualise 37
Embrace Heritage 37
Caution 38
Functional Modifications 42
Transhumanism 43
Informational Tattoos to Document Memory Experience 45
CASE STUDY: EL TRUCHAN 46
Informational Tattoos to Provide Documented Information 47
Informational Tattoos to Turn People into Documents 48
How the Body Affects Records 48
Records Affecting the Body 49
How Records Affect Personal Experience 49
CASE STUDY: DEBORAH HERSHEY 49
CASE STUDY: AARON VAN HORN 51
CASE STUDY: CATY BROWN 52
Case Comparison 54
Recording the Body 55
Explorations of Cosmetic Surgery in Popular Culture 56
The Rise of Influence 56
When Everyone is Beautiful, Is Anyone? 57
Aesthetics=Reality 57
Who “Owns” Beauty and Image? 58
Use and Misuse of Image 59
Revenge Porn and Ownership of Likness 59
AI and Ownership of Image 60
Furthering This Record 60
Conclusion 61
References 63
Further Reading 68
External Guides & References for Further Investigation 70
Trans Modification and The Necessity of Gender Affirming Care 70
Social Media and Influencers 70

Practical Information in Pursuit of Alteration 71
A History of Human Beauty 72
A History of Alterations 73
Investigations on Dysmorphia 76
Artists in the Operating Room 78
Modification Dipictions in Media 80
Classism in the Pursuit of Beauty 83
University College Cork, Surgical Conference, 2nd Prize Poster 2017 84
Appendix I: Original Dissertation Proposal 85
Introduction of premise 85
Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions 85
Objectives: 85
Research Questions: 86
Additional Ideas to Explore 86
Scope and definitions 87
Limitations 87
Research Context and Literature Review 88
Literature Review: 88
Methodology 88
Interviews 89
Dissemination 91
Work Plan 91
Resources Required 91
Ethics and Confidentiality 91
Appendix II: Reflection on the Dissertation Process 92
Appendix III: Interviews 93
Interview with Aaron VanHorn 93
Proposed Questions for Semi-Structured Interview 93
Interview Transcript 94
Interview With Caty Brown: 125
Proposed Questions for Semi-Structured Interview 125
Interview Transcript 127

Interview with Alexander Taschioglou 146
Proposed Questions for Semi-Structured Interview 147
Interview Transcript 149
Interview with El Truchan 181
Proposed Questions for Semi-Structured Interview 181
Interview Transcript 183
Interview with Deborah Hershey 200
Proposed Questions for Semi-Structured Interview 200
Interview Transcript 202
Appendix IV: Copy of Ethics Form 216

INTRODUCTION: DECORATE TEMPLES, EDIT DOCUMENTS, ABUSE METAPHORS

If the body is a temple, it should be decorated according to the tastes of the entity which occupies it; if it is a document, modifications of physicality can improve readability, ease of edit, and improve the metadata.

The human body as a document is a notion that transcends traditional understandings of information sources. In the context of Library and Information Science (LIS), defined it as a repository of narratives, histories, and identities encoded in the physicality of the flesh, considering the human body as a dynamic, multifaceted text, waiting to be "read" and comprehended. In this conceptualization, the human body bears information in its very existence, from the etchings of time on skin to the stories encoded in the arrangement of genes. It encapsulates personal histories, cultural narratives, and individual identities. To delve into the human body as a document within LIS is to explore how it unfolds as a narrative of its own, each scar, tattoo, or alteration a chapter in the story of its possessor.

The human body, as a document, is an uncharted frontier in information science, and understanding it as such opens up avenues for reimagining our roles as information professionals, archivists, and curators. The aim of this thesis is to embark on a captivating exploration of the human body as a document, delving into the intricate ways it can be interpreted, represented, and even commodified within the expansive realm of LIS. Within this multidisciplinary endeavour, navigating through a rich tapestry of narratives, experiences, and transformations, a unique perspective on the concept of the human body as a document emerges.

The significance of this exploration allows for appreciation the human body's potential as a source of information, transcending the traditional boundaries of libraries and archives, beckoning contemplation of ethical and responsible engagement with a unique source, whether in the context of identity, personal history, or the myriad ways the body can be modified for aesthetic, medical, or cultural reasons. It underscores the vital intersection of transparency, identity, and information. Traversing the narratives of individuals who have undergone transformative experiences related to their bodies and document experience, the importance of transparency in matters of identity, genetics, and heritage develops. These narratives shed light on the profound impact that information, or the lack thereof, can have on one's sense of self and place in the world.

This thesis embarks on a journey to unveil the human body as an underappreciated, yet remarkably intricate document, celebrating the body's capacity to carry and communicate information, weaving together stories of transformation, revelation, and self-discovery. Through a series of illuminating case studies, a multidimensional exploration revealing the dynamic interplay between the body, identity, and information, within the expansive tapestry of LIS comes to the fore.

In our pursuit of understanding the human body as a document, we delve into fascinating conceptual territories of documentality, document theory, the Ship of Theseus paradox, and the captivating notion of DNA as information, each of which contributes to our nuanced exploration. Documentality, deeply rooted in the foundations of LIS, invites contemplation of the fundamental nature of documents, their essence, and their role in preserving and conveying information. Document theory, as an intellectual framework, guides understanding of documents as more than mere carriers of data; they are entities laden with meaning, context, and cultural significance.

Engaging with individuals who have experienced significant alterations to their bodies, such as through gender transition or cosmetic procedures, the Ship of Theseus paradox becomes a thought-provoking lens

for the contemplation of questions of identity, authenticity, and continuity of self in the context of such transformations.

DNA, the molecular blueprint of life, is, in essence, a document inscribed in the very cells of our bodies, carrying the instructions for our development, functioning, and genetic heritage. DNA's role as an information carrier is profound, encapsulating not only individual identities but also familial histories, genetic predispositions, and the broader story of our species. DNA serves as a testament to the intertwined relationship between biology and information, prompting consideration of the ethical, practical, and philosophical implications of reading, interpreting, and altering this biological document.

OBJECTIVES

In pursuit of an overarching aim to explore the human body as a document within the expansive domain of LIS, inquiry within this dissertation is further guided by a set of objectives designed to foster a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between the body and information, and the implications this relationship holds within diverse contexts.

The first objective seeks to unravel the intricate process of conceptualizing the human body as a document within the discipline of LIS, decoding the underlying frameworks, theories, and paradigms that enable viewing of the body as an information source. Delving further, examining the diverse lenses through which the body unfolds as a document, whether through the etchings of tattoos, the transformations of gender transition, or the revelations embedded in genetic code, allows an exploration encompassing the tangible and the symbolic ways in which the body communicates its narratives.

The third objective scrutinises the profound relationship between the body and documents, exploring how the body itself can be considered a document, encapsulating narratives of health, identity, and genetic heritage. Additionally, investigating the reciprocal impact of documents, such as DNA profiles and medical records, on the body to understand how DNA shapes self-conception and records influence our healthcare experiences.

In tandem with exploration of the body's impact on documents, the next objective investigates the influence of documents on the body. Here, scrutinizing the transformative power of documents in shaping individual and collective experiences, probing the impact of genealogical records on senses of identity and heritage, as well as the role of legal documents in the transgender experience. This objective allows us to fathom how documents can be catalysts for self-discovery and societal transformation.

In recognition of the multifaceted nature of this inquiry, the subsequent objective spotlights the interdisciplinary dimensions that enrich our comprehension of the human body as a document, exploring how insights from anthropology, art, medicine, and sociology converge with LIS, providing holistic perspectives that extend beyond disciplinary boundaries. Building upon the foundation of interdisciplinary exploration, the final objective underscores the transformative potential of cross-disciplinary insights, delving into how diverse perspectives enhance our understanding of the human body as a document, shedding light on uncharted territories and encouraging innovative approaches within LIS.

In pursuit of these objectives, this thesis embarks on a comprehensive journey into the intricate tapestry of the human body as a document. Through these lenses, illuminating the interplay between the body, information, and interdisciplinary perspectives, shedding new light on the transformative potential of LIS in the study of the human condition.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

In offering a multifaceted exploration of the human body as a document, the value of this document[2] for the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) include a reconceptualization of documents in LIS, interdisciplinary insights, considerations of ethics and identity, and practical implications. By considering the human body as a document, this thesis challenges and expands traditional definitions of documents, opening the door to broader understandings of what constitutes an information source, paving the way for innovative approaches to information management. Through integration of interdisciplinary perspectives, this thesis demonstrates how insights from anthropology, art, medicine, and sociology can enhance LIS through cross-breeding.[3]

The case studies, which include narratives of gender transition, adoption, genetic revelations, and aesthetic interventions, shed light on critical ethical and identity-related dimensions. They highlight the significance of transparency, representation, and information disclosure in shaping individual identities and experiences. Case studies with semi-structured interviews are, generally, a valuable research method in the LIS field as they allow for an in-depth exploration of complex and context-dependent phenomena. Through interviews with individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, case studies provide rich, nuanced data that can uncover hidden intricacies and diverse viewpoints, well-suited for examining real-world situations, offering practical insights and implications for information professionals and libraries. For this dissertation, he interviews conducted with individuals of various experiences contribute to a holistic understanding of the human body as a document and how documentation influences human lives and identities. By exploring how documents and the body reciprocally influence each other, this thesis offers practical insights, underscoring the importance of responsible information practices, informed consent, and the ethical handling of sensitive personal data, particularly in domains like genealogy and healthcare. The case studies serve as catalysts for future research endeavours within LIS, inviting scholars to delve deeper into the nuanced relationships between bodies and documents, expanding our understanding of the intersections between identity, information, and society.

In sum, this dissertation seeks not only to advance the conceptualization of the human body as a document but also illuminate its profound implications for individuals, communities, and information professionals. Through the exploration of diverse narratives and interdisciplinary perspectives, it enriches the discourse within LIS and beyond, offering a holistic view of the dynamic interplay between the body, information, and identity.

DEFINING DOCUMENTS

Exploration of the concept of a "document" in LIS forms the bedrock[4] of our investigation into the human body as a document, laying the groundwork for an expanding definition encompassing a broad array of

[2] This thesis is a document. Everything is a document. By the end, dear reader, you will either be sick of that term or get on the enthusiasm train with me. Choo-Choo.

[3] Genetics wordplay. DNA can be thought of as a document, but we will get to that later in the paper.

[4] In the context of LIS, documents could be argued to be the most important, foundational concept. As Birger Hjørland, professor of knowledge organization at the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen, states: "documents and memory institutions are information resources, and the aim of library science/ documentation/ IS is to facilitate the utilisation of such information resources." Things "that are generally seen as important because of

information sources. Suzanne Briet, a pioneering figure in the field of documentation, offers an intriguing perspective on the essence of a document. She contends that a document can be defined as "any concrete or symbolic indexical sign, preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon" (Briet et al., 2006).[5] This definition, while abstract, resonates with the core idea that documents serve as vessels of representation, reconstruction, and validation. Briet's perspective transcends traditional notions of documents, extending their boundaries to encompass a multitude of forms, from physical artifacts to symbolic signs.

Briet's exploration raises compelling questions about what can be considered a document as she challenges us to ponder the categorization of objects and phenomena. For instance, she posits, "Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But the photographs and the catalogues of stars, the stones in a museum of mineralogy, and the animals that are catalogued and shown in a zoo, are documents" (Briet et al., 2006). Here, we discern a shift in perspective. It is not the inherent nature of the object but its context, intent, and use that endow it with documentality.

Michael Buckland further extends this discourse by emphasizing that a document is fundamentally something from which one can learn, particularly a text (Buckland, 2018). This emphasis on learning and the acquisition of knowledge underscores the educational role of documents. Buckland's perspective broadens the scope of documents beyond the traditional textual confines, acknowledging that they can take various forms, including physical objects, images, and even three-dimensional representations. The status of being a document is attributed, not inherent, with attribution dependant on factors of materiality, intentionality, the necessity for processing, and phenomenological position (Buckland, 2018). In essence, a document is not merely a passive artifact; it is actively constructed through its interaction with individuals and society.

Incorporating these insights into our understanding of documents within LIS opens the door to a more inclusive and dynamic definition that acknowledges the evolving nature of information sources and lays the foundation for an expanded perspective, eventually with potential consideration for the human body itself as a document.

DOCUMENTALITY

In unravelling the multifaceted nature of documents, it is imperative to delve deeper into the concept of "documentality." Documentality encompasses the diverse ways in which objects, signs, and symbols become imbued with meaning, functioning as documents in various contexts. Michael Buckland's perspectives on documentality shed light on this intricate concept as he presents three distinct views of documentality, each offering a unique lens through which to perceive the nature of documents: Information-as-thing, an instrumental view, and a semiotic view. (Buckland, 2014).

In information-as-thing, documents are seen as tangible entities that encapsulate information; not merely carriers of knowledge but information in themselves. This perspective highlights the materiality of documents, emphasizing their role as conveyors of meaning. In an instrumental view, documentality means

their informative potentialities can be termed documents, and if they are judged collectively important, they are collected, organised, retrieved and disseminated by archives, libraries, museums, journals, databases, and other kinds of memory institutions." (Hjørland, 2000)

[5] Briet did also label this as "a definition, which may be, at the present time, the most accurate, but is also the most abstract, and thus, the least accessible," but at least we are getting started. (Briet et al., 2006)

that “almost anything can be made to serve as a document, to signify something, to be held up as constituting evidence of some sort.” (Buckland, 2014) This view broadens the scope of what can be considered a document by emphasizing versatility. The semiotic view of documentality challenges traditional notions of intentionality. The “two previous views emphasize the creation of documents and imply intentionality. Yet both are inadequate on a semiotic view in which anything could be considered as a document if it is regarded as evidence of something regardless of what its creator (if any) intended (if anything). This third view includes cases in which, unlike (2) and (3), there is no creative intent, including natural signs.” (Buckland, 2014) This perspective extends documentality to natural signs and phenomena.[6]

Buckland's exploration of documentality is a testament to the flexibility and adaptability of the concept. It invites consideration of a diverse array of objects and signs that can function as documents in society. “In addition to considering possible documentary properties of objects not ordinarily considered documents, we also need to consider how our ideas about documents may need to evolve to accommodate electronic technologies.” (Buckland, 2014) From passports to metal keys[7], the boundaries of documentality are not confined to convention, and it is this understanding of documentality sets the stage for the subsequent sections of the explorations presented here.

WHAT IS A DOCUMENT? ANSWER: ANYTHING, APPARENTLY

Extending the metaphor of libraries, museums, and zoos[8] as repositories of documents allows elucidation on the dynamic interplay between documents, institutions, and the information landscape. Documents come in various forms and serve myriad purposes[9]; institutional informational repositories house a wide range of objects, each with its own document-like qualities. Building upon the foundational definition of documents as concrete or symbolic signs preserved or recorded to represent, reconstitute, or prove physical or intellectual phenomena (Briet et al., 2006). We will see how this definition seamlessly aligns with the concept of documentality and how it applies to a diverse range of objects,[10] expanding our understanding of what constitutes a document within LIS.

Having established the concept of documentality and its far-reaching implications, extending the metaphor of libraries, museums, and zoos as repositories of documents uncovers how these institutions not only collect and curate traditional documents but also house a vast array of objects and specimens, each embodying its unique form of documentality. Libraries, often seen as sanctuaries of knowledge, hold within their shelves an extensive collection of books and written materials. These conventional documents serve as vessels of information, offering insights into the thoughts, ideas, and narratives of human history. However, libraries have evolved to embrace digital resources, blurring the lines between traditional

[6] Even if we are in a godless universe of chance and chaos

[7] A “metal key does not fit within any conventional view of a document, but it does perform the same function as the card key and the passport.” (Buckland, 2014) Possession of these documents conveys belonging, an identity verified and asserting a right to access.

[8] Zoos as informational repositories and the residing animals as documents in themselves was proposed by Briet, asserting that “the cataloged antelope is an initial document and the other documents are secondary or derived.” (Briet et al., 2006)

[9] “A metal key does not fit within any conventional view of a document, but it does perform the same function as the card key and the passport,” which are considered documents in a more stereotypical, conventional sense (Buckland, 2014). Possession of these documents, further, conveys belonging, an identity verified and asserting a right to access, conveying even greater purpose than as informational items

[10] “Literacy is not enough because documentary codes are increasingly out-of-sight or unintelligible. This increases the need to understand how documentality extends beyond conventional documents.” (Buckland, 2014)

documents and the digital realm. The transition to electronic media highlights the dynamic nature of documentality, where information can exist in both physical and digital forms. Museums, akin to libraries, are repositories of documents, albeit in a different guise. Instead of books, museums house objects, artifacts, and artworks that convey stories of cultures, civilizations, and the natural world. These objects act as documents of history, embodying the essence of bygone eras. The boundary between what constitutes a conventional document and an artifact becomes porous in this context, underscoring the diverse facets of documentality. Zoos, an unconventional member of our metaphorical trio, provide a unique perspective on documentality. Within the confines of zoos, live animals become living documents. These creatures represent the biological diversity of our planet, offering invaluable insights into the world's ecosystems and the preservation of endangered species. In zoos, documentality takes on a living, breathing form as animals become ambassadors of their species and living records of the Earth's biodiversity.

Escalating further, consider human zoos,[11] which have gone out of public prominence but have been replaced by exhibitions such as Body Worlds,[12] an artistic installation displaying bodies for public consumption[13] and the use of medical school cadavers. In these instances, the human body becomes a document, symbolizing more than just its physical presence. Even in academic research, particularly in case-study structures such as in this dissertation, the body becomes a document, the living informational object as point of focus. It represents cultural attitudes, scientific exploration, and the quest for understanding the intricacies of our own biology. Possession of these bodies, whether for exhibition or educational purposes, conveys belonging, an identity verified, and asserts a right to access knowledge about ourselves and the human condition. In this metaphor, documentality breaks the confines of the written word or static objects, extending to the living, the dynamic, and the interactive, revealing the complex interplay between documents, institutions, and the broader information landscape. Just as documents within libraries, museums, and zoos hold stories and knowledge, so too does the human body, reflecting the multifaceted[14] nature of documentality within the realm of Library and Information Science.

DELVING SO DEEP IT GETS MICROSCOPIC: GENE CODING

Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA), serves as the blueprint for the biological structure and functioning of all known living organisms.[15] It is a complex and elegant molecule found within the cells of organisms,

[11] Ethnological Expositions, more colloquially termed “human zoos,” were prominent in the 19th and 20th centuries as public displays of people, usually in a so-called "natural" or "primitive" state. (Mangubat, 2017) These displays sometimes emphasized the supposed inferiority of the exhibits' culture, and implied the superiority of "Western society", through tropes that purported marginalized groups as "savage". (Iannuzzi, 2016)

[12] A traveling exposition of dissected human bodies, animals, and other anatomical structures of the body that have been preserved through the process of plastination.

[13] At least they are no longer living individuals. The founder of the exhibition, Gunther von Hagens, maintains that all human specimens were obtained with full knowledge and consent of the donors, but this has not been independently verified, and in 2004 von Hagens returned seven corpses because they showed evidence of being executed prisoners, (Harding, 2004) which then brings up a host of ethical considerations on consent of participation in such displays. How much time has to pass before the use of bodies (for example: mummies) is considered archeology rather than grave robbing? I asked my neighbor, an archeologist with the University of Oxford, and she said the question made her uncomfortable.

[14] Interdisciplinary perspectives further enrich our comprehension of the human body's role as a document in various contexts, shedding light on its profound significance in our information-abundant world.

[15] What if the DNA in a human body suddenly vanished? According to Randall Munroe is his exploratory work *What If?*, the person would “instantly be about a third of a pound lighter.” Noted. Oh, and the individual would also

containing the genetic instructions necessary for the development, growth, functioning, and reproduction of these organisms; in essence, the code of life. In the context of LIS, DNA can be conceptualized as an information document encapsulating a wealth of genetic information in the form of a long sequence of nucleotide bases, including adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G), and thymine (T). Organized into specific sequences, the bases form genes that encode instructions for the synthesis of proteins and other molecules essential for an organism's structure and function. In this perspective, DNA becomes a document of biological information. It stores data about an organism's traits, genetic predispositions, and evolutionary history. LIS professionals may engage with DNA data in various ways, from archiving genetic information to facilitating research in fields like genomics and personalized medicine. Understanding DNA as an information document underscores its pivotal role in the storage and transmission of biological knowledge, making it a subject of great importance within the LIS domain. This concept of DNA as an information document reflects the interdisciplinary nature of LIS, where biological and genetic information intersects with traditional documents, further enriching the field's scope and relevance.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: ON A BOAT

The Ship of Theseus paradox, rooted in ancient philosophical discourse, presents a thought experiment that has captivated the minds of scholars and thinkers for centuries. The story goes that the Athenians, as a tribute to their legendary hero Theseus, preserved his ship for generations. However, as the ship aged, its wooden components naturally decayed and were replaced with new timber. This gradual replacement raised a profound question: Is the ship that exists after all these replacements the same ship that Theseus once sailed? The philosopher Plutarch (c. AD 46-120), in his writings, encapsulated the essence of this paradox: "This ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same." (Floridi, 2016a)

This paradox extends beyond ships and wooden planks, delving into the heart of identity and continuity, transcending into areas like biology, technology, and personal identity. Consider the human body—a dynamic system in constant flux, where cells are continually replaced.[16] How do we define the identity of a person over time? Is it the same person if the components change?[17] Philosopher Luciano Floridi addresses this in asserting that “questions about identity and sameness through different times or

experience “death within days or hours from either rapid systemic infection or systemwide organ failure.” (Munroe, 2019)

[16] Craig Calcaterra, in *Rethinking Fandom*, applies this metaphor to sports teams, where fan loyalty transcends players, coaches, managers, and ownership resulting a centring on logos and team symbols. Even as team rosters change drastically from season to season, the team's identity persists through its emblem, much like the ship's identity through its name. (Calcaterra, 2022) This extension of the Ship of Theseus paradox into various domains showcases the complexity of defining identity and sameness—a challenge that confronts LIS professionals as they navigate the ever-evolving landscape of documents and information.

[17] This paradox additionally highlights a fundamental challenge faced by LIS professionals and anyone dealing with the concept of documents—defining identity and sameness across time, circumstances, and alterations. Just as the ship's identity is questioned when its parts are replaced, the same challenges apply to documents, particularly in the digital age, where data can be effortlessly copied, modified, and distributed. Determining the authenticity and identity of a document becomes complex. Floridi aptly notes that questions about identity are goal-directed—they are asked to attribute responsibility, plan, collect taxes, trust someone, or authorize actions. It's about context and the right interface to answer the question. The ship is Theseus' when discussing legal ownership, but it might not be the same from the perspective of its composition. (Floridi, 2016a)

circumstances are really goal-directed questions, asked in order to attribute responsibility, plan a journey, collect taxes, attribute ownership or authorship, trust someone, authorize someone else, and so forth. Insofar as they are dealt with in absolute terms, they do not deserve to be taken seriously." (Floridi, 2016a) Identity, in essence, depends on why you're asking and what interface you're using to answer.[18] In the concept of cell turnover, where the body replaces old cells with new ones, replacement forms just another facet of this identity puzzle. As the Ship of Theseus is continually renewed, so too is the human body, with most of its cells replaced over time. Yet, fundamental patterns persist, allowing it to function as a single, coherent entity. The glue that holds this identity together lies in the relationships between these components and the nature of their interactions.[19]

CONNECTING SAILING SHIPS WITH SAILS TO CHANGING CELLS WITH CONTINUITY

The Ship of Theseus paradox, with its exploration of identity through change, finds a captivating parallel in the human body and its constant renewal through cell turnover. This intriguing phenomenon provides us with profound insights into the nature of identity, continuity, and the self.

Human bodies are not static entities; they are dynamic systems that undergo continuous renewal. Consider that about "330 billion cells are replaced daily, equivalent to about 1 percent of all our cells. In 80 to 100 days, 30 trillion will have replenished—the equivalent of a new you."[20] (Fischetti, 2021) These statistics underscore the ceaseless activity within our bodies, where cells are born, serve their purpose, and eventually give way to new ones. This turnover occurs at varying rates throughout the body.[21] Some cells, like those in our colon, are replaced every three to five days, ensuring the efficient functioning of this vital organ. In

[18] The Ship of Theseus paradox has profound implications when extended to libraries, museums, and zoos. In libraries, books are continually replaced, updated, or even digitized. Is a library still the same library when its collection is entirely digital? Similarly, museums hold exhibits that can change over time, altering the essence of the museum itself. Zoos, too, replace animals as they age or pass away, raising questions about the zoo's identity.

[19] "The same holds true about the special system represented by you. It seems plausible to assume that Theseus's ship, the axe, and yourself are constituted by interacting and coordinated components, but the problem concerns the changes undergone by such components. Consider your body. Most of it cells are replaced over time, yet some fundamental patterns hold, so it may not be the replacement with identical components that matters but rather that their relationship to each other and the nature of their interactions are conserved. And yet, what is this 'glue' that guarantees the unity and coordination of a system like yourself, thus allowing it to be, to persist, and to act as a single, coherent, and continuous entity in different places, at different times, and through a variety of experiences?" (Floridi, 2016a)

[20] "The human body replaces its own cells regularly. Scientists at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, have finally pinned down the speed and extent of this "turnover." About a third of our body mass is fluid outside of our cells, such as plasma, plus solids, such as the calcium scaffolding of bones. The remaining two thirds is made up of roughly 30 trillion human cells. About 72 percent of those, by mass, are fat and muscle, which last an average of 12 to 50 years, respectively. But we have far more, tiny cells in our blood, which live only three to 120 days, and lining our gut, which typically live less than a week. Those two groups therefore make up the giant majority of the turnover. About 330 billion cells are replaced daily, equivalent to about 1 percent of all our cells. In 80 to 100 days, 30 trillion will have replenished—the equivalent of a new you." (Fischetti, 2021)

[21] Skin cells, which endure considerable wear and tear as the body's outermost defence, rejuvenate every two to four weeks, maintaining the protective barrier that shields the body from the external environment. Hair cells, on the other hand, follow their own cycle, with women's hair cells having an approximate lifespan of six years and men's lasting for around three years. Livers, the body's detoxifier, regenerate with new cells every 150 to 500 days, ensuring its ongoing ability to cleanse systems. Stomach and intestinal cells, which confront corrosive substances like stomach acids, typically last only up to five days due to their challenging environment. Even our skeletal system is not immune to the cycle of renewal. Bones continually regenerate, with the complete process taking a decade. This renewal slows as we age, contributing to the gradual thinning of our bones over time. (Opfer and Troutner, 2022)

contrast, our muscle and fat cells can take up to 70 years to renew,[22] reflecting the diversity of functions and life spans within the body; a complex ecosystem of renewal and persistence. While some parts, like the eye's cornea and certain brain regions, remain relatively static over time,[23] other areas, such as the olfactory bulb responsible for our sense of smell and the hippocampus crucial for learning, exhibit rejuvenation. This intricate interplay between renewal and constancy illustrates the multifaceted nature of our bodily identity. (Opfer and Troutner, 2022)

Amidst this ceaseless renewal, one element remains unchanged—the DNA. As neuroscientist Jeff Hawkins states in his book A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence, genes are molecules that replicate without an intrinsic direction or goal, "they are not heading in any particular direction, nor is one gene intrinsically any better than another, just as one molecule is not intrinsically better than any other molecule. Some genes may be better replication, yet as environments change which genes are better at replicating also changes" (Hawkins, 2022) DNA evolves, adapts, and persists in a more generational sense, but in the individual body serves as a thread of continuity. Unlike other atoms and molecules that constantly change, DNA "remains the same from the day a cell's birth" (Opfer and Troutner, 2022), serving as a timestamp of its creation, acting as an immutable core around which the ever-changing body revolves. It anchors our identity in the unchanging blueprint of our genetic code, even as our cells and tissues evolve. This intricate interplay between constant renewal and underlying genetic stability invites us to ponder the nature of identity. We are, in a sense, ships navigating the sea of existence, our cells and tissues akin to the ship's planks, continuously replaced as we journey through life. Yet, the compass guiding our identity remains firmly rooted in our DNA, charting a course through the ever-changing tides of existence.

"EDITING"

"But how do you get to know yourself when your body is constantly changing? Whether it's shedding skin or growing new hairs, the human body is in constant flux." (Opfer and Troutner, 2022) In the vast landscape of personal identity, where one's sense of self is continuously shaped and reshaped, the concept of editing emerges as a powerful tool for self-exploration and realization. This notion finds resonance both in the realm of documents and within the human experience, providing a lens through which we can better understand the construction of our identities.

In the realm of documents, editing is a familiar and fundamental concept. A written manuscript, a digital report, or an artistic composition; the act of editing involves refining and revising existing content to achieve a desired outcome. Editing is not merely a correction of errors; it's a deliberate and purposeful process of transformation, often driven by the need to convey a more accurate message or to align with evolving goals and intentions. This capacity for editing documents opens up new vistas of understanding and expression as it allows refinement of thoughts, effective communication, and adaption to changing circumstances. Editing documents is, in essence, an act of self-expression and self-definition, as the choices made during the editing process reflect the author's evolving perspective and intentions. This notion of editing extends seamlessly into the realm of personal identity. As Luciano Floridi aptly observes, "Human

[22] More typically, fat and muscle "last an average of 12 to 50 years, respectively" (Fischetti, 2021)

[23] Note that not all cells within the body follow the pattern of renewal. For instance, neurons in the cerebral cortex, the brain's outer layer governing memory, thought, language, attention, and consciousness, remain constant from birth to death. This unique aspect of neuronal identity has critical implications for cognitive health, "because they aren't replaced, the loss of these cells over time can cause maladies like dementia." (Opfer and Troutner, 2022)

life is quickly becoming a matter of Onlife experience, which reshapes constraints and offers new affordances in the development of our identities." (Floridi, 2011) Just as a document is refined to better convey its message, individuals can engage in a process of self-editing to refine and articulate their sense of self.

Plato's "metaphor of the chariot[24] [introduces] a specific problem regarding the nature of the self as an informational multiagent system: what keeps the self together as a whole and coherent unity?" (Floridi, 2011) This question resonates deeply in an age where technology and the infosphere are integral to our lives. We have the tools and opportunities to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct our identities in ways that were previously unimaginable. Editing, in the context of personal identity, involves a twofold process: individualization and identification.[25] As Floridi argues, both processes presuppose an informational approach. The individualization of the self precedes its identification, and this individualization can be expressed in informational terms. With rapid technological evolution, the process of editing personal identity evolves as well. Identities are crafted not only through traditional means but also by interacting with an expanding array of technological agents and informational systems. This interaction is akin to self-observation through the eyes of others, where the self is seen as seen by others. (Floridi, 2011)

Just as "the quality, availability, and accessibility of personal records deeply affect who we think we are and may become," (Floridi, 2011) so does the act of capturing, editing, saving, conserving, and managing memory. In a digital age, this process becomes increasingly significant in both protecting informational privacy and constructing one's personal identity. "Recorded memories tend to freeze the nature of their subject. The more memories we accumulate and externalise, the more narrative constraints we provide for the construction and development of personal identities. Increasing our memories means decreasing the degree of freedom we might enjoy in defining ourselves."[26] (Floridi, 2011)

The concept of editing in the context of personal identity is an ongoing journey of self-discovery, self-expression, and adaptation. In the infosphere, we are continuously exposed to new technologies, opportunities, and modes of interaction. This presents both challenges and possibilities for self-poiesis, exploring the capacity to edit, modify, and redefine the self in response to evolving circumstances and aspirations. It is a dynamic process that involves embracing the radical consequences of the information revolution.[27] (Floridi, 2011) In subsequent sections, the concept of editing transcends curation of digital presentation and Onlife construction to include bodily alteration in the domains of gene editing, body modification, and personal identity, all within the context of the ever-changing landscape of the digital age.

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[24] Floridi even connects Plato's chariot to cell turnover and the ship of Theseus: "In biology, the study of multi-cellular organisms made up of specialized tissues and organs already shows the complexity of the problem. In philosophy, one appreciates its difficult nature as soon as one recognises in it an instance of the infamous problem of Theseus' ship. If one of the two horses is replaced, is it the same soul? And what happens if the charioteer decides to dismount the chariot and leave the horses to their destiny?" (Floridi, 2011)

[25] "What keeps the self together as a whole and coherent unity? This question may be addressed from two perspectives. One is synchronic and focuses on what may constitute the self as a particular whole unity, continuously existing and coherently behaving at any given time. The other is diachronic and focuses on what may enable the self to remain that unity, or simply itself, at different times and through changes." (Floridi, 2011)

[26] For Further Information, refer to Floridi's *the Informational Nature of Personal Identity*

[27] As Floridi suggests, this is only the beginning of an information evolution that may reshape our self-understanding and the construction of our identities. (Floridi, 2011) As we venture further into this digital age, there is a growing need to develop a robust ethics of self-poiesis and a new ecology of the self.

BODY MODIFICATION: EDITING THE SELF

Body modification refers to the intentional alteration or manipulation of the human body's physical appearance or function, encompassing a wide range of practices and procedures, often carried out for diverse reasons, from cultural and aesthetic motivations to medical necessities. Body modification enjoys deep roots in human history and is a reflection of our innate desire to shape, redefine, or transcend the limitations of our physical form. Within the context of this dissertation, body modification serves as a key concept in exploring the dynamic relationship between the human body, identity, and technology. The examination of body modification will encompass not only traditional practices like tattooing and piercing but also extend into emerging technologies such as gene editing, prosthetic enhancements, and even the impact of digital avatars on our perception of self.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of body modification, it's essential to distinguish between various types and motivations behind these alterations. Normative modifications conform to societal norms and expectations, aiming to enhance or maintain an individual's appearance within accepted standards. Non-normative modifications, on the other hand, deviate from conventional norms and may include body alterations that challenge societal perceptions of beauty or identity. Within normative/non-normative, the primary categories explored for this investigation are aesthetic, corrective, and functional. Aesthetic body modifications, carried out primarily for visual or artistic purposes, include practices like tattooing, piercing, scarification, and body painting. Aesthetic modifications are often deeply rooted in cultural and individual expressions of identity. Corrective body modifications, undertaken to address physical or medical conditions, include surgeries and treatments to correct congenital deformities, injuries, or medical conditions, such as cleft palate repair, orthodontic procedures, or breast reconstruction after mastectomy. Functional modifications, aimed at enhancing the body's capabilities or compensating for physical limitations, include the use of prosthetic limbs, cochlear implants, and other technologies designed to improve or restore bodily functions.[28]

As Slate columnist and literary journalist Mark O'Connell notes, stories of escaping or transcending the limitations of the human body have been part of human narratives since ancient times. These narratives, from Gilgamesh's quest for immortality to Prometheus stealing fire from the gods,[29] reflect our enduring fascination with the idea of shaping our bodies and existence beyond our inherent limitations.[30] (O'Connell, 2018) Moreover, as Professor Robert C. Solomon emphasizes in his lecture series on existentialism and the meaning of life, aesthetic body modifications are often driven by a profound desire for self-expression. Making strong references to the work of Kierkegaard, he investigates the aesthetic life, a life devoted to personal satisfaction and the prioritization of individual pleasure. Aesthetics, as a category within body modification practices, intertwines with philosophical inquiries about the nature of human existence, identity, and the pursuit of personal satisfaction. (Solomon, 2000) Individuals who engage in practices such as tattooing, piercing, or scarification may be driven by their pursuit of personal satisfaction and self-

[28] Or even exceed them. Stay tuned for information on exceeding normative bodily capabilities in explorations of Transhumanism.

[29] See also: Achilles's mother dipping him into the sticks, Daedalus improvising wings for his son

[30] "It was not supposed to be this way: we weren't supposed to be weak, to be ashamed, to suffer, to die. We have always had higher notions of ourselves. The whole setup-- Garden, serpent, fruit, banishment-- was a fatal error, a system crash." (O'Connell, 2018)

expression, the modifications serving as means of articulating identity and artistic preferences, reflecting an existentialist emphasis on individualism and personal choice.[31]

Aesthetic body modification aligns with the philosophical exploration of the aesthetic life, emphasizing personal satisfaction, individuality, and self-expression, reflecting the human desire to define and express identity through physical alterations. However, as Solomon's insights suggest, the pursuit of satisfaction in the aesthetic realm is not without its challenges, including the persistent longing for more and the ever-present spectre of boredom. In this sense, aesthetic body modification serves as a tangible manifestation of the complex and paradoxical nature of the human quest for identity and personal fulfilment.

This is not to say that all aesthetic modifications are entrenched in the philosophical concept of aesthetics. Body modification has potential to transcend cosmetic values and offer corrective, functional capability. In some instances, the visual results of physical interventions are merely a side effect to affirming care.

HORMONE THERAPIES: WHAT'S THE T(EA)?

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is a medical treatment involving the administration of hormones to individuals, often to alleviate symptoms of hormonal imbalances or to induce physiological changes in the body. This therapy plays a transformative role in various contexts, including gender affirmation, aging, and the potential for future body editing technologies. For transgender individuals, HRT is a crucial component of gender affirmation, enabling alignment of physical characteristics with gender identity. This process involves the administration of hormones such as oestrogen or testosterone, which induce changes like breast development, facial hair growth, or voice modulation, depending on the desired gender presentation.

To understand HRT within the metaphor of editing, consider the human body as an intricate document with metadata. In the digital realm, metadata provides essential information about a file, such as its author, creation date, and content; similarly, the human body has its metadata in the form of hormones, which determine various physical and emotional attributes. HRT can be likened to the process of editing metadata. Just as editing metadata in a digital file can alter its properties and how it is perceived, HRT can modify the body's attributes and the individual's sense of self. For transgender individuals, this means aligning their physical metadata (hormonal profile) with their authentic gender identity, even beyond the visual changes. According to Luxeria, a transwoman and YouTube personality, an "unexpected gift from HRT (hormone replacement therapy) was the change in [thought] pattern and emotional response. I no longer felt null and void. I begin to experience nuance in all sorts of feelings and a multitude of tears. Happiness, sadness, frustration, empathy, and even enjoyment. A world that has slowly faded to hues of grey from adolescence begin to shimmer with vibrancy." (Celes, 2023b)

HRT extends beyond gender affirmation and has the potential to redefine the body's metadata in various scenarios. In the future, as hinted by journalist Aaron Bastani in his work Fully Automated Luxury Communism, advanced body editing technologies, including gene therapies and genome sequencing, may allow individuals to modify their biological attributes. This could potentially eliminate debilitating

[31] Solomon does highlight a central challenge associated with the aesthetic life: boredom. He notes that the relentless pursuit of personal satisfaction and pleasure risks a constant cycle of desire and fulfilment. As he eloquently puts it, "every time you satisfy a desire, a new one takes its place." This cycle of desire perpetuates itself, making the complete satisfaction of one's desires seem elusive. (Solomon, 2000) In the context of aesthetic body modification, individuals may find themselves continually seeking new modifications and alterations to satisfy their evolving aesthetic preferences. The quest for novel forms of self-expression and identity through body modification parallels the notion of insatiable desires within the aesthetic life.

conditions, disrupt the traditional provision of healthcare, and even create new forms of biological inequality. (Bastani, 2019) In this metaphor of body editing and metadata manipulation, HRT represents a precursor to more advanced forms of bodily transformation. It showcases the profound impact of altering the body's hormonal profile, not only on physical characteristics but also on emotional and psychological well-being. Whether for gender affirmation or broader health purposes, HRT exemplifies the transformative potential of medical interventions in reshaping the narrative of the human body.

SMART CASUAL MEANS WEARING TAILORED GENES

The idea of modifying the metadata of life, akin to rewriting the code of digital files, is a profound concept that encompasses a range of transformative technologies, including gene editing and hormonal manipulation. These technologies have the potential to redefine human existence, health, and identity, allowing us to shape our physical and mental well-being in unprecedented ways.

In *Evolving Ourselves,* Juan Enriquez asserts that "deliberate introduction, for a specific purpose, of new instructions into a living creature's gene code, in ways that will then be passed on to descendants, transforms evolution from a random, slow slog into a rapid, human-directed process. This particular branch of Technology may just be our species' single greatest technical achievement so far." (Enriquez, 2016) Gene editing technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 allow us to directly manipulate the DNA of living creatures, guiding evolution in ways that were once unimaginable. This transformation from a slow, natural process to a rapid, human-directed one is indeed a remarkable achievement.

Enriquez's analogy of the scalability of life, exemplified by George Church's encoding of an entire book into DNA[32], illustrates the vast potential of genetic technologies. The ability to store and manipulate vast amounts of information within the genetic code opens new possibilities for data storage, bioengineering, and more. The expansion of our toolkit for manipulating life correlates with the growth of human ambitions and dreams, "after all, if you control and write the code, you control evolution." (Enriquez, 2016)[33]

Beyond potential to revolutionize healthcare, advancing genetic manipulation extends into the realm of identity and self-expression. The same gene-editing techniques used to influence aging could be deployed for other purposes, such as modifying sexuality or physical appearance[34], ultimately leading to ethical questions about the boundaries of identity and the implications of tinkering with the genetic and hormonal underpinnings of the body. The concept of changing the metadata of life represents a brave new world of possibilities and challenges, signifying the increasing ability to rewrite the code of existence, transcending the limitations of natural evolution.

[32] The author and geneticist George Church encoded the digital 1s and 0s of his word file into the four letters of a DNA molecule and synthetically produced copies of his entire book written in gene code, ultimately billions of copies in the space of a small dot of DNA dried onto a piece of paper (which was ultimately given to comedian Stephen Colbert) (Enriquez, 2016)

[33] For further reading, refer to *Evolving Ourselves* for information on chemical modification, gene surgery, and potentials in life expansion (which has shown promising results in earthworms) (Enriquez, 2016)

[34] If "we begin altering hormones and modifying genes to influence aging, we are also likely to deploy these technologies and techniques for other purposes, like modifying sexuality; GnRH regimens can block the onset of puberty in a transgender youth, or complement cross-sex hormone regimes. Perhaps one day genetic surgeons will modify humanity's looks not with a knife, toxin, or filler but by silencing or promoting specific access of one's gene code" (Enriquez, 2016)

EDIT OR COMPLETE RE-CONSTRUCTION

Gene editing stands as one of the most revolutionary advancements in our quest to understand, manipulate, and, in a sense, "edit" the human body. Building upon the concept of changing the metadata of life, gene editing takes us to the very heart of our existence: our genetic code, allowing for precise, targeted modifications to our DNA, heralding a new era in the manipulation of life's most fundamental document.

As explored in previous sections, cosmetic alterations and hormone therapies already provide unprecedented control over the body; from superficial appearances to inner physiological processes. Gene editing transcends these interventions, offering the ability to rewrite the script of life itself. In this brave new world, the human body becomes not only a canvas for modification but a living document, where the ink is replaced by genetic code, and the editing tools are as precise as the finest pens, allowing us to write and rewrite the story of our existence.

THE BODY AS RECORD: MICRO SCALE

Revisiting the metaphor, traversing libraries, museums, zoos, and even human zoos,[35] a myriad of documents tell the story of humanity, from books and artifacts to living specimens and even to the human body itself. Delving deeper beneath the surface[36] yields the micro scale of this extraordinary repository: the human body as a record. Just as museums and medical schools use the human body as a valuable resource for research and education, bodies, more specifically our DNA, serve as intricate records of existence.

DNA

DNA encodes the genetic instructions for the development, functioning, growth, and reproduction of all known living organisms. It's the universal code of life, passed down from generation to generation. Enriquez reminds us that of the approximately 19,000 human genes, “only 60 are completely new, having arisen over the past 5 million years since we last shared a common ancestor with chimps,” and the genome retains a 99 percent overlap still. (Enriquez, 2016) This genetic continuity underscores the incredible story of evolution and the interconnectedness of all life on our planet. Exploring the micro-scale of the human body, evolutionary context upholds the profound unity that exists in genetic heritage.

TRANSMISSION OF DNA AS RECORD

DNA serves as a record that not only defines the blueprint of an individual but also carries a unique historical account, passed down through generations, etched in the molecular code of DNA sequences, containing information about the lineage, ancestry, and traits of an organism. Epigenetics[37], delves into how genetic record is influenced and altered by external factors and experiences, encompassing changes in gene expression that don't involve alterations to the underlying DNA sequence. Epigenetic modifications,

[35] Speaking to non-fiction author and Journalist Florence Williams (for *The Nature Fix*), Professor Park Bum-Jin of the Lab of Forest and Environmental human Health at Chungnam National University asserted that urban environments and interior confinement keeps humanity as a collective in a permanent zoo. "Cities are Human Zoo and I think schools are Human Zoo too... We cannot give up those systems-- city and schools-- the forest is the only exit we have for those humans who live in the human Zoo" (Williams, 2018)

[36] Yes, pun intended

[37] A specialty within the scientific field of genetics

like DNA methylation and histone modifications, act as a molecular memory, marking genes for activation or silencing based on environmental influences.[38] Epigenetics underscores that DNA acts as a dynamic, responsive living record, beyond a static blueprint, with contributes to genetic history, personal and ancestral.

Inheritability of DNA Trauma

Futurist Juan Enriquez and scientist Steve Gullans write on how humans change the course of evolution, directly influencing, in ways both intentional and not, the future of the species. In an investigation of transgenerational inheritance, Enriquez highlights the long-term effects of trauma which can even be passed from mother to child. In the case of a famine caused by Nazi restriction of food and fuel supplies to the Netherlands in World War II, babies born during that time frame suffered long-term health effects including higher incidents of a variety of conditions: heart disease, obesity, glucose intolerance, and obstructed airways. Trauma "altered the victims Gene code for life, even if the victim had yet to be born. So far, geneticists had no issue with this, because one could argue under the rules of traditional genetics, the famine had also acted directly on the genes of these babies in utero." But, later born siblings, in periods when food was available and the war over, continued to suffer ill-effects and in even further follow-up studies, the daughters of Dutch mothers who had suffered through the war and famine children with twice the average rate of schizophrenia. The genetic memory lingered for multiple generations, leaving collectively inherited scars. (Enriquez, 2016)[39]

Furthermore, Enriquez's research points to the multi-generational effects of trauma. Pregnant mothers exposed to toxins can pass on deleterious epigenetic memories to their grandchildren. Paternal sperm can carry epigenetic signatures correlated with conditions like autism in their offspring,[40] underscoring the interplay between our environment, our genes, and the potential consequences for future progeny.[41] (Enriquez, 2016) Modifications ripple through generations, leaving genetic record of shared experiences.

OWNERSHIP OF DNA

Having established that DNA and gene expression can be modified, in ways both intentional and non, the question of who owns our DNA arises as the next complex and ethically charged issue that resonates deeply in the realm of scientific research and healthcare. The remarkable case of Henrietta Lacks, immortalized in Rebecca Skloot's book "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," serves as a powerful backdrop for exploring the intricate dimensions of DNA ownership.

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[38] For example: the experiences and exposures of an individual, such as diet, stress, or even prenatal conditions, can lead to epigenetic changes in their DNA which can persist over time and are sometimes inheritable.

[39] Experiences and stressors, whether external or internal, can imprint their effects on our genes across generations. The inheritability of trauma in DNA, as revealed through the lens of epigenetics, extends beyond historical cases like the Dutch famine during World War II, holding a poignant relevance, particularly in grappling with significant global events like the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. The profound disruptions to daily life, social isolation, and the anxieties associated with the virus could leave lasting imprints on genetic code with experiences transmitted to future generations, shaping their genetic responses to stress, immunity, and mental health.

[40] A “study of paternal sperm uncovered an epigenetic signature that correlates with signs of autism in young children. A study of mice found that sperm and eggs obtained from obese parents carry epigenetic signals that persist even when the embryo is carried by a normal weight surrogate mother, resulting in overweight, diabetic offspring." (Enriquez, 2016)

[41] Understanding the inheritability of trauma through epigenetics emphasizes the importance of not only addressing immediate challenges but also considering the long-term implications of collective experiences, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive mental health support, social resilience, and a holistic approach to well-being.

Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman, unknowingly contributed a small sample of her cancerous cells to science when she sought medical treatment in 1951. These cells, known as HeLa cells, became one of the most important tools in medical research, leading to breakthroughs in understanding diseases like cancer, AIDS, and the development of the polio vaccine. Henrietta Lacks herself tragically succumbed to cervical cancer at a young age, but her cells continued to thrive and multiply, becoming the first immortal human cell line. The story of Henrietta Lacks raises questions about the ownership of genetic material, particularly in light of her lack of consent for the genetic materials donation and her family's lack of knowledge of[42] the situation. Should individuals have control over their genetic information, or does it become public property when it is used for scientific research?[43] (Skloot, 2011)

Medical Confidentiality: Disease

Ownership of DNA takes on a particularly intricate dimension when it intersects with genetic diseases and familial inheritance. Genetic diseases, often caused by deleterious mutations or alterations in specific genes, can have far-reaching consequences not only for the individuals affected but for their families and future generations. As Juan Enriquez notes, the dynamics of genetics in a population can significantly impact the spread of both deleterious and beneficial genes. In small, isolated populations, bad genes take longer to breed out, contributing to higher instances of genetic disorders, and, conversely, rare beneficial mutations potentially propagate more quickly, enhancing survival or reproduction. (Enriquez, 2016)

The Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report (MMWR),[44] meticulously documents disease trends and outbreaks. This comprehensive data reveals long-term health trends and sudden deviations that are crucial for public health decision-making. Understanding genetic predispositions and familial connections to diseases is pivotal in this context, but raises questions about the extent to which genetic information should be accessible and shareable, given its profound implications for public health.

The legal landscape surrounding DNA ownership, especially in cases of genetic diseases, is a multifaceted arena where genetic information is generally afforded the same level of protection as other medical data. However, challenges arise when sharing such information has repercussions for family members. For example, when a patient learns about a genetic condition, it may inadvertently reveal information about their parents or siblings.[45] This scenario underscores the intricate web of genetic relationships and the ethical responsibility to navigate them. The principles of autonomy and informed consent become paramount in balancing individual privacy with familial implications.

Judicial challenges have been successful where the health authority has taken a rigid approach that fails to properly take into account each particular individual. In cases of gender dysphoria, there have been successful judicial challenges as many current legal policies do not encompass necessary surgical interventions which are recognized as treatment. (Herring, 2019) The case of gender dysphoria serves as an example of successful judicial challenges when legal policies fail to encompass necessary surgical

[42] Or compensation for

[43] In a world where genetic information is increasingly valuable and accessible, understanding the ownership of DNA is a crucial step in navigating the intricate intersection of science, ethics, and individual rights.

[44] A medical equivalent of the Kelley Blue Book for cars

[45] According to UK Medical Law, "genetic information is entitled to the same kind of protection as any other medical information. The difficulty is that genetic information about A may reveal genetic information about B. For example, informing a patient that they have a certain genetic condition may mean the patient will realize that either their mother or father has that condition." (Herring, 2019). For further information, refer the Herring's *Medical Law* and *Medical Law and Ethics*

interventions as recognized treatments, highlighting the need for evolving legal frameworks that accommodate the nuances of medical conditions and genetic information.

Additionally, the debate around the ownership of DNA is further complicated by the commercial value of genetic material. Organs and DNA hold significant financial worth, especially in the fields of transplantation and pharmaceutical research. While there are laws and regulations in place to govern these domains, the question of whether an individual truly owns their own body remains a subject of debate. It "is unclear whether your body is property and, if so, who owns it. And this is not just a question of interest to high-minded philosophers. Human bodies can be a huge financial value. There is a serious shortage of organs for donations. The current law is fairly strict over when a person's organs should be used for transplantation and some people believe the law should be liberalized. There is also increasing awareness of the value of an individual's DNA, especially when it can be used to develop new drug treatments," as has been explored in the case of Henrietta Lacks. At "the same time, great public outcry greeted the news that hospitals have been routinely storing parts of dead children's bodies without proper consent. This is led to a change in the law under the Human Tissue Act 2004."[46] (Herring, 2019)

The ownership of DNA, particularly in the context of genetic diseases and familial inheritance, presents a labyrinthine terrain of legal, ethical, and privacy concerns. While individuals have the right to autonomy over their genetic information, the implications of genetic data ripple through families and communities, meaning that navigating these complexities necessitates a delicate balance between individual rights, informed consent, and the greater good of public health. The case of Henrietta Lacks serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring legacy of genetic information and the ethical questions it continues to raise.

"The Greater Good"

The concept of "the greater good" often emerges as a crucial argument in discussions surrounding the ownership of DNA, especially in the context of genetic diseases and familial inheritance. It raises complex ethical questions about the balance between individual rights and the broader societal benefits that can be derived from genetic information. Henrietta Lacks, a woman whose cells were taken without her knowledge or consent, unknowingly contributed to one of the most transformative advancements in medical science: immortalized cell lines. Her cells played a pivotal role in numerous scientific breakthroughs, including the development of the polio vaccine and advancements in cancer research. The use of her cells, although ethically questionable due to the lack of informed consent, undeniably contributed to "the greater good" of humanity by advancing medical knowledge and saving lives.

This notion extends to other areas of medical practice, as Enriquez points out. Organ "transplants are very recent phenomenon and another good example of how the most 'unnatural' of practices can save lives." (Enriquez, 2016) The ability to transplant organs, while ethically complex and sometimes reliant on the generosity of donors and their families, exemplifies how practices that may seem unnatural or morally ambiguous can yield immense benefits for individuals and society as a whole, emphasising that sometimes the greater good necessitates actions that challenge our preconceived notions of morality.

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[46] The "question of whether we own our bodies is not just a philosophical interest. It is of practical legal importance. The traditional approach of the law has been the body is not property. This means that a person cannot sell their organs (see Human Tissue Act 2004, section 32, which makes it an offense to deal with organs for reward). However, in more recent years, the law has been more open to the idea that in some circumstances of body might become property (see R v Kelly (1998))." The leading case is now [Yearworth v North Bristol NHS Trust (2009) EWCA Civ 37] (Herring, 2019) For an overview of the Human Tissue Act 2004, refer to chapter 8 in Jonathan Herring's *Medical Law and Ethics.*

Advances in DNA sequencing and genetic research have already allowed for inference of a wide range of information, from physical characteristics to ancestry, with capabilities continuously improving and providing increasingly accurate and granular insights to genetic makeup. While this information has the potential to be misused[47] or infringe upon individual privacy, it can also be harnessed for the greater good. Genetic data can inform medical treatments tailored to an individual's genetic profile, improving the effectiveness and safety of interventions.

Medical Confidentiality: Aesthetics

Medical confidentiality, a cornerstone of medical ethics, traditionally encompasses a wide range of healthcare information, from genetic data to treatment records. However, extending this argument to aesthetic interventions, such as cosmetic procedures, surgeries, and body modification raises intriguing questions about the boundaries of confidentiality.

Aesthetic interventions, particularly in the context of the beauty industry, often lack transparency. While medical procedures typically involve a confidential doctor-patient relationship, many aesthetic procedures and treatments are performed outside of traditional medical settings, often a lack of rigorous oversight and raising concerns about public access to information about the safety, effectiveness, and potential risks of these interventions. In an era where access to public information is highly valued, should aesthetic procedures and their outcomes be subject to greater transparency and scrutiny? The rise of photo manipulation and digital enhancement tools blurs the lines between digital representations and real-life appearances. Celebrities and influencers regularly alter their online images and, in addition to photo editing, may edit themselves through surgical means, leading to unrealistic beauty standards. In this context, individuals seeking aesthetic interventions might argue that the disclosure of such procedures is necessary for the well-being of society. Knowing what is achievable through cosmetic enhancements, possibly only through such methods or possibly not even through them, could help combat false perceptions and promote healthier beauty ideals.[48] The Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge serves as an example of the potential consequences of the lack of transparency in aesthetic interventions. Many young individuals attempted to emulate her fuller lips through a dangerous viral trend, leading to injuries and health risks. Had there been more transparency about her lip enhancements, it might have discouraged such risky behaviour.

Enhancing one's appearance can lead to perceptions of increased beauty and competence. Some individuals undergo significant pain and expense to alter their physical attributes, which can potentially affect how they are perceived by others, including in the context of sexual selection.[49] "Ethical or not, cosmetics and surgeries often work. Those who are 'put together' tend to be perceived as more beautiful and competent. Even certain artificial looks, for example those clearly signalling exaggerated and grossly inaccurate mammary capacity are no longer hidden but celebrated" (Enriquez, 2016)

Furthermore, modern gene technology, as discussed in Enriquez's work, can impact sexual selection and attraction by altering pheromonal and chemical reactions. These advancements further blur the lines

[47] "DNA sequencing already allows one to statistically infer hair and eye colour, racial ancestry, and various other physical features." (Enriquez, 2016)

[48] In France, legislation has recently been put in place to increase transparency of photomanipulation for this very reason. The French National Assembly requires all Photoshop retouching that is performed on models be clearly labeled. (Smith, 2022)

[49] "Many endure significant pain and expense to alter eyelids, smooth foreheads, shrink noses, tuck tummies, or paralyzed skin and attempts to attract those who might have ignored their unenhanced version" (Enriquez, 2016)

between aesthetic interventions and genetic modifications, raising complex questions about information disclosure and societal consequences.

The argument for medical confidentiality extends to aesthetic interventions, but it is a topic that requires careful consideration; balancing the right to privacy with the need for transparency in an era where information and appearance are highly valued presents an ongoing ethical challenge in the realm of aesthetics.

YOU'RE THE REASON OUR KIDS ARE UGLY

Aesthetic interventions, such as cosmetic procedures and surgeries, play a fascinating role in mitigating sexual selection by influencing how individuals are perceived and valued within society. These interventions can significantly impact attractiveness and, consequently, an individual's mating prospects and job opportunities. Aesthetic interventions often focus on enhancing an individual's physical appearance, which can include altering facial features, body shape, or skin texture, aiming to align appearance with prevailing cultural standards of beauty. By doing so, individuals may increase their perceived attractiveness, potentially broadening their pool of potential mates.[50]

The relationship between appearance and economic opportunities is well-documented. Studies have shown that individuals who conform to societal beauty ideals are more likely to secure higher-paying jobs and receive preferential treatment in various social settings. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as 'erotic capital,' highlighting the inherent value placed on physical attractiveness. "We value different human bodies differently, and the ugly truth is that the ones that fit the prevailing cultures definition of beauty are evaluated at a higher worth. There's both a power and a survival necessity in seeing yourself the way the world sees you" (Kelleher, 2023) While the focus on aesthetics may seem superficial, it's important to recognize that appearance influences not only self-esteem but also social perception and interactions. The ability to modify appearance can be a form of empowerment, allowing alignment themselves with societal ideals of attractiveness. In a world where appearances play a significant role in various aspects of life, this can be seen as a form of adaptation and even a survival strategy.

The influence of aesthetic interventions on sexual selection provides a natural segue into the next topic: DNA editing. Just as aesthetic interventions aim to alter one's physical appearance to meet societal standards, DNA editing explores the possibility of modifying the very genetic traits that influence attractiveness, health, and other aspects of our lives. This transition highlights the continuum from superficial alterations to more profound genetic modifications, sparking important ethical and philosophical questions about the extent to which we can, or should, control our genetic destiny.

[50] The title of this section is a reference to an art show I once exhibited in (I know, so talented—one of the panels can be seen on the title page) where I investigated a viral story of a Chinese woman who had undergone extensive cosmetic surgery and consequently secured a wealthy husband for herself. When the children eventually came, the husband initiated divorce proceedings and attempted to sue his ex for "false advertising." This story on its own raises questions around transparency, genetics, and sexual/mating selection, but brings in considerably more with the revelation that the original news report of the incident was a fabrication by a cosmetic surgeon as a form of advertising, using photographs of a model who was not informed on the use of the images, as the "after" of the fictional woman's cosmetic surgery tale. The real model whose images were used in the viral report lost credibility in her industry and suffered consequences to her livelihood as the public believed her appearance to be the result of surgical intervention. YouTuber Luxeria articulated after her surgeries that "it is kind of weird, the business side of being a plastic surgeon and having a plastic surgery practice [...] it's kind of advertised as a product but the product is you" (Celes, 2023a)

HIPSTER BIOLOGISTS WEAR SKINNY GENES

DNA editing raises profound questions about the extent to genetic destiny can be manipulated, an extension of the idea that humans can be considered as documents, with genetic code serving as an informational material that can be edited and rewritten to influence various aspects of existence. Just as documents are edited to correct errors or enhance their content, DNA editing involves altering the genetic code to achieve specific outcomes. In this context, humans can be viewed as dynamic documents, and their DNA as a repository of information that can be modified to enhance health, prevent diseases, or even influence traits and characteristics.

One of the most ethically complex aspects of DNA editing is potential applications in foetal intervention and the creation of designer babies. Foetal intervention allows for genetic corrections before birth, potentially preventing the transmission of hereditary diseases or enhancing desired traits. This concept harkens back to the idea of creating "perfect" documents, in this case, perfect human beings. The film "Gattaca" serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the ethical dilemmas associated with genetic engineering. In a society where genetic profiles determine one's social status and opportunities, the film delves into themes of genetic discrimination, identity, and human potential, illustrating how DNA editing crafts "ideal" documents, but at the cost of individuality and societal equality.[51]

In context of DNA editing, it's essential to recognize that humans possess not just one, but four parallel evolving genomes: core DNA, epigenome, microbiome, and virome. These genomes interact with each other and evolve at different rates, collectively defining an individual's biology and attributes. DNA editing can potentially influence all these genomes, shaping not only an individual's life but also what they pass on to future generations. As genomics advances, the ethical quandaries posed by genetically engineering children are becoming increasingly complex. As “genomics moves forward, standardizes, and cheapens, it is certain the baby will be sequenced at some point later in life. If one has significant disposable income, it soon may make sense, on a speculative basis, you get an early genome read after birth, a comparative genetic baseline as the ultimate first baby photo" (Enriquez, 2016) This, in turn, raises questions about the ethics of making genetic decisions for individuals who cannot consent.

In the scientific thriller Transhuman, Ben Bova explores the future of genetic engineering and the politics surrounding advancements in medicine (Bova, 2015) and the powerful allure of editing our genetic code to achieve longer lifespans, enhanced abilities, and even the creation of transhuman beings. In the end, DNA editing is a testament to our increasing ability to manipulate the human document, raising fundamental questions about what it means to be human and the ethical boundaries[52] we must navigate in our pursuit of genetic perfection.

[51] In the comic series *Transhuman*, Jonathan Hickman explores the near future fiction of the discovery of superhuman genetic engineering, the possibilities inherent in such a discovery and the manipulation of the body, and the marketing campaigns that would invariably strive to bring such discoveries into mainstream wider use. (Hickman and Ringuet, 2009)

[52] Ignorance of the technology or refusal to acknowledge the questions that arise from it are not an option. "We're entering a new era. The first transhuman beings are with us now." As a society, we” can't stop this. You can't put a cork in scientific knowledge.” (Bova, 2015)

HORMONE TREATMENTS: GETTING THE T(EA)

Just as DNA editing reshapes the narrative of genetic code, hormone treatments provide another dimension to this story by focusing on the modulation of hormones in the body and acting as chemical messengers that regulate various bodily functions, from growth and metabolism to mood and sexuality. Hormone treatments can be likened to editing the script of a play, altering the cues and dialogues that guide the body's performance.

One of the most well-known applications of hormone treatments is in transgender individuals seeking gender affirmation, with treatments allowing alignment of physical characteristics with identity. For transgender individuals, hormone therapy is not merely an edit but a profound transformation, enabling them to live as their authentic selves. Hormone treatments, much like DNA editing, are intimately connected to personal identity, providing individuals with a means to rewrite their own narratives, to align their bodies with their inner selves, and to feel more comfortable in their own skins. This speaks to Floridi's exploration of personal identity as an informational construct. As individuals navigate the process of hormone therapy and experience physical and emotional changes, they are essentially editing their own narratives of self.

However, the use of hormone treatments also presents challenges and ethical considerations as they can carry risks and may lead to unintended consequences. For example, modifying hormones to influence aging may also have implications for other aspects of a person's biology, such as sexuality. The question of who owns one's personal identity in the context of hormone treatments is complex, touching upon issues of bodily autonomy, informed consent, and medical ethics. While individuals have the right to make decisions about their own bodies, the interplay between personal identity and societal norms adds complexity to the narrative. This complexity parallels the discussion on ownership of DNA, highlighting the intricate relationship between the individual's story and the societal context in which it unfolds.

CASE STUDY: ALEXANDER TASCHIOGLOU

Alexander Taschioglou, 18M, is a transman who has just begun attending University and is underway with his transition journey. In discussing his perspective on documentation and its connection to the concept of the human body as a document, Alexander delves into his experiences with gender identity and transition. He shares that he didn't fully realize he was transgender until his sophomore year of quarantine, although he had early inklings as a child. His journey has included various forms of "editing" his body, such as getting top surgery and experimenting with his appearance during quarantine, often influenced by societal norms. He acknowledges that the internet plays a significant role in shaping beauty standards and pushing certain looks, particularly among influencers who tend to look similar but also reflecting on the impact of the quarantine and lockdowns, and reliance on the Onlife experience during that time, on self-discovery and self-acceptance. Alexander also touches on the importance of documentation regarding gender identity, emphasising the significance of recognition and validation from strangers in important positions.

> "Documentation is a lot about how your logged and how you're perceived by other people and how they can categorise you and know how to perceive you and think about you and handle you and whatever. You get certain messages enough and they become internalised [and you] see yourself as other people see you. This

> is kind of interesting, because in that regard, the documents can become your internal code."
>
> "When [my name on documents] matches, it feels good. And what doesn't, it feels bad. […] [The University has] the opportunity for you to be able to put in your own information, your name, and pronouns. […] But the reason I get hung up on [the wording] is because it's little things that are what we passively absorb. […] You could say: cisman, trans man. But if you say, Man, trans man, you're implying something that we don't count completely."
>
> "If you don't have [the proper documentation], then you can't do all those things. Then you have the conflicting information, which at the lowest level can [be] slightly dysphoric. But big deal. Bigger level, it can end up confusing or certain transactions might not work with like bank stuff."

In terms of bodily autonomy, Alexander distinguishes between permanent and temporary bodily autonomy and discusses how clothing and self-expression help convey his gender identity. He reflects on how external appearance changes validate his identity, regardless of whether he's alone or in front of mirrors. Alexander expresses a desire for physical changes, such as becoming stronger, getting leaner, and getting tattoos, to feel authentic to himself.

> "I get dysphoric when I'm alone, not just like around other people. So, it's not always on being perceived by people. It's also just how I'm perceiving myself. […] I still bind when I'm alone […] If I were locked in a room forever, I don't know if I would think [all the physical alteration] would be worth it. […] I have dysphoria when I'm alone, but it gets stronger when I'm around somebody else. So that is-- I can't do this until I'm dead. This is not sustainable."
>
> "I feel like life hadn't really started [before the transition], just felt like there's something that was going to happen that hadn't happened. And now I know: it was coming out as a guy; I know that because now I feel a lot more integrated. I was trying to like feel the right thing, and I learned a lot, […] I got the haircut, I got a binder […] So, like, those sorts of outward changes helped me feel better […] I'm grounded now, I am I feel like my identity, I understand it, and it's stagnant."

Alexander's interview provides valuable insights into the concept of the human body as a document, particularly in the context of gender identity. His experiences with gender transition and "editing" his body illustrate the profound impact that documents, both official and self-generated, can have on an individual's life and self-perception. The interview highlights the role of documentation in recognizing and validating one's gender identity, as well as the challenges that arise when official documents do not accurately represent one's identity. Perspective on the internet's influence on beauty standards and the importance of recognition from strangers adds depth to the discussion of societal perceptions and external validation.

Alexander's reflections on bodily autonomy and the use of clothing and self-expression to convey gender identity shed light on the complexity of personal identity and how individuals navigate their bodies as documents.

Full Interview Transcript can be found in the Appendices (Mack and Taschioglou, 2023)

THE BODY AS RECORD: MACRO SCALE

Principally, individuals who alter themselves do so in order to compromise their internal view of themselves with their external body. This motivation reflects back on the idea of cosmetic surgery as 'psychology with a scalpel,' fixing internal problems by repairing external ones. Success of surgery relies heavily on this motivation, as a study conducted for the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology by American psychologist Ed Diener[53] found. The study of Physical Attractiveness and Selective Well-Being concluded that, while no correlation between peer-perceptions of attractiveness and individual happiness could be found, "self-perceptions of physical attractiveness do relate strongly and positively to happiness." (Cascio, 2014) Regardless of the peer-perception of outcome, when the individual receiving the surgical modification feels satisfied in uniting their internal desired aesthetic with their external form, self-esteem and personal happiness increase.

The human body, in its infinite variability, serves as a canvas upon which individuals and cultures inscribe their stories, memories, and identities. Tattoos, in particular, stand out as poignant examples of how the body becomes a repository of memories and personal history. In Christopher Nolan's film "Memento," the protagonist, afflicted with short-term memory loss, resorts to tattoos as a means of preserving essential information. Tattoos serve as a permanent augmentation of the flesh, encoding crucial reminders and narratives directly onto the skin. This practice, although fictionalized in the film, captures the essence of how tattoos can become deeply intertwined with memory and identity. As Nolan aptly puts it, "If we can't make memories, we can't heal." (Nolan, 2000) Tattoos provide a tangible means of encapsulating significant life experiences and personal narratives. H.G. Wells saw universal access to knowledge as more than just an intellectual boon but as a crucial step toward an uplifted society, one that "foreshadows a real intellectual unification of our race." In one startlingly present passage, he wrote: 'The whole human memory can be, and probably in a short time will be, made accessible to every individual [...] it need not be concentrated in any one single place [...] it can have at once the concentration of a craniate animal and the diffused vitality of an amoeba." (Wells, 1994)

Beyond memory, tattoos often serve as markers of personal history, chosen, inked, and worn as badges of individuality and autonomy. The act of getting a tattoo can be a declaration of self, a statement of personal choice and control over one's body. In the words of Roxane Gay, "My getting a tattoo was not about them. It was about me doing something I wanted, that I chose, for my body." (Gay, 2017) Tattoos symbolize a reclaiming of the body, a process through which individuals mark themselves and assert ownership over their physical forms. However, body modification also brings forth a paradox. The act of altering one's body can be both empowering and unsettling. Roxane Gay's reflection on her own tattoos encapsulates this tension. She describes the thrill of getting tattooed and the intoxicating feeling of taking her body back. Yet, she also delves into the turmoil of body image and the fear of being seen differently. This paradox mirrors the broader societal narrative, where body modifications are celebrated as expressions of personal agency but are simultaneously subject to societal judgment and scrutiny.

Body modifications extend beyond personal narratives; becoming integral to cultural stories and traditions of various cultures throughout history who have used body modifications, such as scarification, piercing,

[53] Ed Diener is a University of Utah professor, senior scientist for the Gallup organization, author, and lead researcher in the field of subjective well-being.

and tattooing, to mark rites of passage, signify social status, or denote tribal affiliations. These practices serve as visible markers of cultural identity and heritage, encapsulating the narratives of entire communities.

In essence, the body serves as a living record, where personal and cultural narratives are etched into flesh and memory. Tattoos, scars, piercings, and other body modifications become chapters in the ongoing story of an individual's life and culture's history. They reflect personal choices, assertions of identity, and cultural traditions, intertwining the individual's narrative with that of the broader society. The body becomes a canvas of stories, a testament to the human impulse to record and express our experiences and identities.

AESTHETIC MODIFICATION

According to Dr Sander L. Gillman, PhD, an American professor and cultural and literary historian known for his contributions concerning the history of medicine, it persists that "the individual [desires] to join a new community defined economically, socially, erotically (or in all three ways), but this group is primarily designed physically." Cosmetic surgery exists as the vehicle through which social mobility can be achieved. An individual "can become someone new and better by altering the body…The individual can be transformed and made happy." (Gilman, 1999)

In a society where cosmetic surgery gains greater prevalence every year and the standards of beauty threaten to homogenize the aesthetic of Western culture, some individuals intentionally move away from the standard. In established, conventional cosmetic surgery procedures, aesthetic value reigns paramount, with the finished result being the end that justifies any means. Outside of this, in the subculture known as Body Modification, the reasoning behind physical alteration remains varied. According to Steve Haworth, an American body modification artist responsible for the popularization and invention of modern transdermal and subdermal implants, ear pointing, and laser branding, known popularly in the body modification community as "the father of modern 3D body art"[54], the four driving factors behind modification are: Sexual Enhancement, Spirituality, Shock Value, and Aesthetics (Gary and Jacobson, 2006). Even with the additional considerations and the drastic differences in end result, however, members of the Body Modification community often site their primary motivations for alteration in the same terms as those pursuing more standard procedures: Happiness.

Aesthetic modification as a practice goes beyond the pursuit of traditional beauty standards.[55] In a society of increasingly prevalent availability of cosmetic intervention, exploration of avenues that challenge established norms, and have potential to redefine the concept of beauty itself, emerges.

To understand aesthetic modification, it's essential to delve briefly into the philosophy[56] of aesthetics. Traditionally, aesthetics has been associated with the concept of beauty.[57] However, as philosopher Bence Nanay points out, beauty is not a fixed attribute of objects but a dynamic and context-sensitive concept,

[54] Steve Haworth drives the field of Body Modification with additional work in the pioneering of magnetic implants, dermal punching, tongue splitting, genital beading, and suspension. Bizarre Magazine once referred to him as "the most important, most respected Body Modder." (Pitts, 2015)

[55] "We don't know a lot about prehistoric makeup, but we do know that people decorated themselves and we can guess that they did so for reasons both spiritual and aesthetic." (Kelleher, 2023)

[56] For a tour through the field of Aesthetics, which introduces ideas from Plato to the postmodernist, see Christopher Kul-Want's *Aesthetics: A Graphic Guide* (Kul-Want and Piero, 2014)

[57] "Aesthetics today is not only a scholarly discipline but also the means for developing a philosophy of life based upon emotion" (Kul-Want and Piero, 2014)

varying depending on individual perspectives, cultural contexts, and the circumstances in which it is encountered.[58] Aesthetic experiences encompass more than beauty, involving emotional and perceptual engagement with objects or experiences. Dr Sander L. Gilman's insights highlight that individuals often seek cosmetic procedures not merely to conform to societal beauty standards but as a means of personal transformation. Cosmetic surgery, in this sense, becomes a vehicle for self-discovery and self-improvement, allowing individuals to defy existing identities and embrace new ones, often aligned with desired or aspirational physical form. This process signifies a reclamation of the body, a transformation, and a pursuit of happiness through self-realization.

Aesthetic modification encompasses both normative[59] and non-normative procedures. Non-normative procedures, prevalent in the subculture of Body Modification, diverge from traditional beauty paradigms with diverse motivational possibilities including sexual enhancement, spirituality, shock value, and aesthetics.[60] Regardless of these differences, the underlying aspiration for happiness remains a common thread among those who choose to modify their bodies.

Body modification, including tattooing and scarification, boasts deep historical and cultural roots with practices dating back thousands of years[61] and often used to mark rites of passage, signify tribal affiliations, or express spiritual beliefs. They serve as visible markers of cultural identity and heritage, reflecting the narratives of entire communities.

The pursuit of aesthetic modifications is driven by a multitude of motivations, each deeply rooted in personal experiences, beliefs, and cultural contexts. While beauty enhancement comprises a prominent theme, it remains only one facet of a diverse landscape. Aesthetic modifications can represent resilience, artistic expression, self-discovery, spiritual connection, and the celebration of cultural heritage. By exploring these motivations, we gain insight into the complex relationship between the body, identity, and human aspirations, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of aesthetic modification in our society.

RECONSTRUCT

A significant and compassionate motivation for aesthetic modifications is reconstruction. Individuals who have experienced accidents, injuries, or congenital conditions that affect their physical appearance may seek reconstructive surgery to restore functionality and appearance. These procedures not only enhance their physical well-being but also help rebuild their self-esteem and confidence, a motivation which echoes through generations in humanity's quest for healing and normalcy.

[58] "The most widely shared take on Aesthetics is that it's about beauty. Just look around in the street-- the word 'aesthetics' routinely shows up in beauty salons. And it is tempting to take something like a beauty-salon approach when trying to explain what Aesthetics, the philosophical discipline, is about. The general thought is that some things are beautiful, others are not. Aesthetics helps us to keep them apart, and maybe even explain why beautiful things are beautiful" (Nanay, 2019)

[59] Including alterations aimed at achieving conventional beauty ideals (e.g., rhinoplasty, breast augmentation), sought to harmonize with established norms and enhance perceived attractiveness.

[60] Just in a less conventional way—more akin to the philosophical idea of aesthetics than the social media idea.

[61] The "earliest forms of tattooing and modification are estimated around 60,000 BCE where Australian Aborigines practiced body painting and ritual scarification as well as penile subincision and elongation of the labia." (Camphausen, 1997)

Evidence from prehistoric times reveals humanity's enduring pursuit of enhanced bodies. Ancient corpses recovered from glaciers and bogs provide a poignant testament to this inclination.[62] The motivation for reconstruction took a notable turn during World War I when doctors confronted the devastating facial injuries sustained by wounded veterans and cosmetic surgery as a distinct field gained prominence seeking to restore a semblance of normalcy to those profoundly scarred by war. The artwork of Eleanor Crook, showcased in the Gordon Museum of Pathology at Guy's Hospital in London, captures this historical turning point in her installation, "And the Band Played On," vividly portraying the facial injuries typical of musket shots and fuel fires. These injuries left soldiers permanently disfigured, exacting a toll on both their physical and mental well-being. Early surgical procedures, while less refined than contemporary techniques, offered a glimmer of hope. They provided a path for veterans to reclaim their lives and mental equilibrium (Crook, 2016).

After the cessation of hostilities, the field of cosmetic surgery flourished, evolving from a means of restoring normalcy to a tool for addressing the psychologically traumatizing impact of appearance, a form of 'psychology with a scalpel.' For many doctors today, this labelling remains particularly relevant, even as the field has evolved from a device enabling a return to normalcy into corrections of cosmetic imperfections. The value of their practice relies on being able to make patients happy, to fix whatever bothers an individual about themselves and fix it, easing the mental tension brought on by the perceived outward flaw. Within the narrative of reconstruction, the motivations extend beyond surface appearances; they delve into the intricate layers of human psychology and resilience. Aesthetic modifications, in this context, serve as a bridge to healing and self-acceptance, echoing the age-old human quest to overcome physical adversities and emerge with renewed vitality and self-assuredness. This motivation, rooted in ancient history and forged through modern trials, continues to shape the landscape of aesthetic modifications.

EXPRESS

For some, the body serves as a canvas for artistic expression. Tattooing, body painting, and other forms of body art allow individuals to communicate creativity, beliefs, and personal narratives; the body becomes a living work of art, a testament to the fusion of aesthetics and self-expression.

According to Deborah Harris-Moore, lecturer in the Writing Program and professor at University of California, Santa Barbara, “extreme” normative surgeries which target a visual hyper-perfection[63] “are likely not considered by the modification community because the procedures are not performed for the sake of difference and individuality; the emphasis in modification is often on the individual and nonconformity” (Harris-Moore, 2014). The nonconformity of body modification references standard westernised culture, an important consideration when examining its history because, although a relatively new phenomenon and a growing site of resistance throughout Europe and North America, it retains a long history in many cultures,

[62] “The earliest evidence we have of enhanced bodies comes from the decorated skin of ancient corpses pulled out of glaciers and bogs. There's Otzi the Iceman who lived some 5300 years ago in the area that straddles the Austrian-Italian border, whose skin was marked with sixty-one tattoos. There's a male mummy from Chile who lived around 5000 BCE, who was found with a cluster of dotted tattoos above his upper lip, a sort of moustache. In the same burial ground, archaeologists found evidence of cosmetic palettes, flat stones that would have been used for grinding up naturally occurring pigments to make fine, colourful powders-- not too dissimilar from the eyeshadow palettes I keep in a basket next to my bathroom sink.” (Kelleher, 2023)

[63] Like those undergone by the “human Barbie” and “human Ken” influencers

often used as a rite of passage or a means of showing tribal membership.[64] In this context, although some would classify cosmetic surgery as body modification, the term Body Modification "more commonly designates a different category of surgeries and body alterations, including tattoos, piercings, tongue-splitting, scarification, non-traditional implants, and others. Cosmetic surgery representations focus on the before and after image, where the product is the ultimate aim, while body modification is concerned with the individual experience." (Harris-Moore, 2014)[65] Many members of the Body Modification community view their bodies as projects, as ways of investigating themselves and self-transformation, concerning itself more with the experience than outcome, encompasses performative modifications (such as suspension[66]). Artists like Stelarc use this system as an instrument for art, as shown in the image. Like those undergoing surgery in order to affect their lives and social standing, body modifiers believe that their identity can be transformed through altering their bodies and further through alteration of the body's symbolic and personal meaning.

The French artist Orlan stands as one of the first prominent artists to seize the opportunity presented by the advancements of surgery and completely redesign herself beyond the realm of aesthetic and into art. From 1990 to 1995, Orlan pushed the artistic career that had been defined as "a series of rebirths and triumphs of will over technology" to a higher threshold, by undergoing permanent reconstruction of her body in an attempt to rewrite Western art. (Jeffries, 2009) Although the surgeries attempted to mimic the ideals of beauty presented in classical art,[67] Orlan insists that vanity and beauty played no major influencing role. In her words, she wanted "to be different, strong; to sculpt [her] own body to reinvent the self. […] [She] tried to use surgery not to better [herself] or become a younger version of [herself], but to work on the concept of image and surgery the other way around." (Jeffries, 2009) Even the procedures themselves reflect Orlan's goals of transcending the aesthetic and offering a critique of the conventions of cosmetic surgery; donning elaborate designer costumes, Orlan read poetry and played music while experiencing her alterations in full consciousness, broadcasting herself to the world through video.

The decoration of the body, according to the definitions of success for both cosmetic surgery and body modification, ultimately aims to increase the happiness and psychological well-being of the individual pursuing alteration. According to a 2004 study conducted by Dr Katharine Phillips, MD, and Dr David Castle, MD, clinical psychiatrists, reports on psychological health before and after surgery suggest that

[64] Examples of this include Māori face tattoos, the crocodile scars of Papua New Guinea tribesmen, or the Tufi facial tattoos of the tribeswomen. For more information on this, refer to the documentary *Taboo: Extreme Rituals* as well as *Tattoos and Body Modification in Antiquity* by Philippe Della-Casa and Constanze Witt.

[65] Because Body Modification concerns itself with the individual experience, the experience itself is often considered body modification, even if it leaves non-lasting marks. An example of this type of modification would be suspension. Suspending is a temporary modification where fishhooks suspend an individual in the air by their flesh. Since it exists to be temporary, it is primarily done for the feeling, not the aesthetic, although some do take photographs of suspension as art. The feelings elicited from this can be so intense as to be addictive and even orgasm inducing to its users. Suspension can also be publicly performative as with the group Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CORE) who perform for the public, suspended from hooks embedded in their backs, hanging weights on themselves, as well as piercing all the way through face--cheek through mouth to other cheek. For more information on suspension, refer to the documentary films *Modify* and *Flesh and Blood*. An example can be seen in the image of the artist Stelarc.

[66] Artists like Stelarc use this system as an instrument for art, as shown in the image. Like those undergoing surgery in order to affect their lives and social standing, body modifiers believe that their identity can be transformed through altering their bodies and further through alteration of the body's symbolic and personal meaning.

[67] Her forehead mimicked Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, her mouth François Boucher's *Europa*, and her chin Botticelli's *Venus* (Jeffries, 2009).

surgery leads to positive improvements in body image and quality of life[68], but the research additionally indicated that several predictors, including a history of depression or unrealistic expectation of outcome, indicated a negative impact of surgery on the mental well-being of the individual. (Dittmann, 2005) In the context of BDD and the study of *Physical Attractiveness and Selective Well-Being*, these results conform to expectation. When the individual receiving the surgical modification feels satisfied that their change suits them, the temple of their body truly conforming to their personal taste, self-esteem and happiness increase, regardless of the peer-perception of outcome.

ENHANCE

Aesthetic modifications, when driven by a desire for enhancement, extends beyond addressing perceived flaws and seeks to elevate appearance to new heights. Procedures like lip fillers, cheek augmentations, and facelifts aim to enhance natural features, often guided by personal preferences and ideals of beauty. The motivation for enhancement within the realm of aesthetic modifications resonates with the human fascination with self-improvement and pursuit of an ideal self.

Beauty, throughout history,[69] has held a mesmerizing allure. Umberto Eco's exploration of the concept delves into its philosophical roots, examining early Pythagorean thought[70], celebrated the harmony and proportion between elements as a source of beauty, seen as a manifestation of perfection and defined by its opposition to elements representing error and disharmony. This quest for symmetry and balance profoundly influenced "Greek art and went on to become one of the finest canons in the art of Classical Greece." (Eco and McEwan, 2010) Within the motivation of enhancement, the indomitable human spirit's quest for an ideal intertwines with its earliest reflections and reaches into the depths of philosophy. Whether it's celebrating symmetry and harmony, finding beauty in the most unexpected places, or experiencing the disinterested pleasure of the beautiful, the motivation for enhancement resonates through the ages. It reflects our enduring fascination with the concept of perfection and the desire to bring it to life, even if only through the prism of our own reflections.

[68] In another study, psychologist David Sarwer, PhD, director of the Education, Weight and Eating Disorders Program at the University of Pennsylvania, and associate professor of psychology at the Center for Human Appearance at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, found that a year after receiving cosmetic surgery, "87 percent of patients reported satisfaction following their surgery, including improvements in their overall body image and the body feature altered. They also experienced less negative body image emotions in social situations." (Dittmann, 2005)

[69] In ancient tombs, researchers discovered not only evidence of cosmetics and face paint but also dark, glassy surfaces that resembled mirrors. These mirrors, with their reflective qualities, may have held spiritual significance for Neolithic societies. They were more than mere tools for vanity; they symbolized a connection between the material and the spiritual, bridging the gap between the self and the divine (Kelleher, 2023).

[70] Pythagorean speculation extended to the idea that even elements considered ugly in isolation contributed to the overall beauty and equilibrium of the universe. In this cosmic perspective, everything had its place, and even the seemingly irregular or monstrous played a role in maintaining order. The person who best articulated the distinction between Beauty and the Sublime was Immanuel Kant. He described the characteristics of the beautiful, including disinterested pleasure, universality without concept, and regularity without law. Beauty, according to Kant, was something that could be enjoyed without desiring to possess it, appreciated for its intrinsic organization, and experienced as a source of pleasure that transcended rationality (Eco & McEwan, 2010).

The Fountain (or Procedure) of Youth

Anti-aging, as a facet of the enhancement motivation, speaks to pursuits for eternal youth and enduring beauty, often reflecting a desire to preserve self-image, regardless of the passage of time.[71] The pursuit of anti-aging often intertwines with longing to hide inner flaws and the relentless march of time. It represents a yearning to conceal the decline that inevitably accompanies aging. In this quest for eternal youth, we tread a fine line between preserving our outward allure and succumbing to the tragic destiny that may await those who are condemned by their own bodies (Eco, 2007). Anti-aging, as a motivation for aesthetic modification, embodies a quest to hold onto perceived beauty and vitality, to maintain image, and to conceal the inner changes that accompany aging.

The Halo Effect

Outside of the added boost in confidence that physical beauty can provide, which leads to an increase in performance, better looking people tend to have better career prospects and a higher earning potential than their less aesthetically pleasing counterparts[72]. In his book, *Making the Cut: How Cosmetic Surgery is Transforming Our Lives*, Dr Anthony Elliott, PhD, professor, social theorist, and sociologist, highlights this phenomenon by asserting that "social and economic factors [exist] which suggest that cosmetic surgery is a good bet. Wherever you are in the world, the good-looking, thin and tall/ can expect to earn more than their dowdy, plump or short colleagues—and this in developed countries, often in spite of strict anti-discrimination laws." (Elliott, 2008) In China, and countries like it where anti-discrimination laws remain lax, aesthetic beauty exists as an openly stated prerequisite for success, with eight percent of job applications listing height and physical appearance necessities, according to the Labor Bulletin of China (Gao, 2008)[73]. Despite coming under pressure in recent years under discrimination lawsuits,[74] blunt "articulations of height requirements in employment advertisements [remain] commonly and widely seen." (Lu, 2009) Both hospitality and government work advocate these minimum requirements for aesthetics, leading many into dangerous and painful procedures like bone stretching in order to attain career advancement.[75] Even in westernized nations that have anti-discrimination laws in place to prevent this kind of aesthetic prejudice, beauty remains an unspoken qualification. In the United States, more attractive

[71] In Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, the paradox of anti-aging emerges where the portrait while the individual remains eternally youthful. This fictionally chilling tale reminds us that we can maintain our external beauty while the portrait of our true selves, hidden beneath the surface, bears the ravages of time. Wilde's narrative explores the consequences of an unchanging, eternally youthful exterior, as Dorian Gray spirals into moral decay while his portrait reflects the true toll of his actions, prompting contemplation of the price of eternal youth. (Wilde, 2020)

[72] This assertion receives a mild contradiction from the study of *Physical Attractiveness and Selective Well-Being,* which concluded that objective measures of attractiveness do not exhibit a significant correlation to success, but rather, self-perception remains the dominant factor in measurements of self-esteem and resulting success. (Cascio, 2014).

[73] Additionally, the Chinese practice requiring the submission of photographs with applications allows "employers to easily discriminate against individuals based on appearance" (Gao, 2008).

[74] These court proceedings began in 2002 when a law school graduate brought a case against the People's Bank of China Chengdu Branch for discrimination during his recruitment for being 3 cm shorter than the standard set by the bank. This case stands as the "first time a plaintiff claimed equal protection violations in a Chinese court under the Chinese Constitution." (Lu, 2009)

[75] In China, many government and hospitality jobs have a minimum height requirement, with 160 cm, 165 cm, and 170 cm being the critical threshold for employers posing height requirements (Lu, 2009), meaning that career success can be difficult for those not able to reach these minimums. In one case study, a 29-year-old man felt inadequate due to his height, disqualified from applying to many jobs and unable to properly ride the larger motorcycles he was interested in. For him "plastic surgery [was] not just a shortcut for achieving the perfect body, [it was] an instrument for realizing the far more individual goal of becoming happier with who he is." (Abraham, 2003)

workers make $230,000 more over their lifetime than those people in the aesthetic bottom seventh[76] (Stein, 2015).

"The Halo Effect" is a psychological phenomenon where our perception of an individual's physical attractiveness influences our overall judgment of their character, rooted in human psychology, affecting various life aspects, including social interactions and financial opportunities. Society places a significant premium on physical beauty; beyond impressing others, enhancing appearance can impact economic and social prospects.[77] Cosmetics,[78] makeup, and other enhancements[79] serve to elevate self-esteem and self-confidence,[80] and the historical significance of beauty and aesthetics cannot be understated. Ancient civilizations, such as the Romans, revered physical beauty. The concept of beauty, however, was often steeped in specific cultural contexts, and notions of beauty have evolved over time. For instance, neoclassicism idealized ancient beauty standards but often overlooked the fact that many ancient cultures, influenced by Oriental traditions, embraced diverse and unconventional notions of beauty that included beings embodying disproportion (Eco, 2007).

According to Ellen Atalanta in her piece *Not Ugly, Just Poor*, confrontation of these arbitrary standards "is significant now, more than ever, [because] our faces have become our most valuable commodity. Thanks to social media, selfies and Zoom calls, our appearance is always front and centre and it has become something we 'should' invest in. Middle and upper-class women have the financial freedom to view an expensive and risky surgical procedure as a 'treat' to allow them to fit the beauty standard and reap the rewards of adherence. The result is a benchmark for 'beauty' only reserved for those with disposable income, and a new beauty class system in which there are those who can afford to participate and those who cannot." (Atlanta, 2022)

Even beyond class implications which can affect monetary and social success, for some the consequences of adherence to contemporary ideals becomes a matter of survival. Cosmetic interventions have played a dual role throughout history, healing and hurting, offering a means of self-expression and empowerment and associated with enforcing arbitrary beauty standards. Women, in particular, have borne the brunt of societal pressures to conform to these standards, although non-binary individuals have also faced harsh judgments for not adhering to traditional norms. "Non-binary people have always faced harsh punishments for failing to physically conform. But makeup has been most closely associated, and most painfully fraught, for those of us who present as women. Traditionally, women are valued more for their physical forms than their mental capacities." For "a non-binary or trans person, makeup isn't always a style choice. 'Passing' to read as cisgender can be a way to avoid facing bigotry and violence. In the New York City Ballroom culture scene of the 1980s and 1990s, performers often competed in the category of 'realness.' [...] Embodying

[76] Study conducted by Economics Professor Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas

[77] People often treat those who appear well-groomed and attractive with more respect. As RuPaul, the iconic drag queen and performer, aptly puts it, "Dress well and you'll make more money." This statement underscores the economic advantages that come with presenting an appealing appearance (RuPaul, 2018).

[78] "Makeup is a way to dominate one's own body, moulding it into shape so that it's form better coincides with the beauty standards of the time." (Kelleher, 2023)

[79] While "beauty work done well can act as a form of social advancement, when badly done these procedures can have the reverse effect, becoming their own class signifiers. Whether it's larger lips, poorly applied filler or too-white veneers, the way beauty treatments are performed is adding another layer of social separation." (Atlanta, 2022)

[80] Makeup artist Bobbi Brown once said, "I believe that all women are pretty without makeup - but with the right makeup, they can be pretty powerful." It reflects the idea that cosmetics can empower individuals, offering them the confidence they need to succeed in various aspects of life, including their careers (Kelleher, 2023).

femininity can be a protective measure in a world that discriminates against transwomen, and makeup can often be central to this construction." (Kelleher, 2023)

AFFIRM

In addition to acting as a necessary societal safety precaution for non-genderconfomists, altering appearance through aesthetic modifications can serve as a powerful means of affirmation and self-identity. For many, these changes align their external appearance with their internal sense of self, and transformations become pivotal in achieving congruence between identity and physical form.

In the context of gender affirmation, beyond the desire for beauty, cosmetic alteration becomes deeply tied to self-identity and empowerment. Transgender surgeries are often perceived as equivalent to cisgender (non-transgender) surgeries in terms of the procedures themselves. However, what distinguishes them is the motivation behind seeking these alterations. For many transgender individuals, these surgeries are not about conforming to societal norms but are essential for their gender identity. Gender euphoria, a profound sense of alignment with one's true self, often follows these surgeries. Experiencing this euphoria is akin to finding a long-lost connection to oneself. It's important to differentiate between this deeply personal journey and harmful narratives that wrongly suggest that transgender individuals undergo physical transformations as a response to trauma or external factors (Celes, 2023b).

Tattoos, though not stereotypically considered an affirmational intervention, have emerged as a powerful form of expression for many transgender individuals. Getting inked serves as a tangible way to embrace their identity and take control of their appearance. In a recent article, Leo Baudhuin explored the idea of tattoos as gender affirming care through a series of interviews with trans-identifying students as the University of Oregon, USA. According to one interviewee, "'Before I was able to have control of my appearance through transitioning, I was able to do so with tattoos […] they made me gain confidence in myself and feel at home in my body while I waited for the long process of transitioning." For some, tattoos are not just body art; they are a form of gender-affirming care, akin to hormone therapy or surgeries.[81] In a society where medical transition options are not always accessible or desired by everyone, tattoos provide an alternative means of embodying one's true self, challenging societal norms and rejecting the idea that one's identity must conform to traditional standards. They are a way of saying, "I am here, and I am proud of who I am" (Baudhuin, 2023).

Considering more stereotypical interventions of transition, YouTuber and trans-woman Luxeria Celes, who documented her transition process, asserted that the aesthetic aspect of transition, facial feminisation surgery, "was the greatest and most rewarding leap of faith in my transition, not without its grey days, nor its ups and downs, but a revealing journey toward inner peace." (Celes, 2023b). Cosmetic modifications can be powerful tools for transgender individuals seeking affirmation, with modifications yielding deeply personal, empowering, and often crucial results, aligning physical appearance with inner identity. They challenge societal norms, promote self-love, and provide a sense of belonging and empowerment to a community that has long faced challenges in expressing their authentic identities.

[81] Baudhuin asserts that he is additionally "very conscious of the fact that HRT [hormone replacement therapy] and surgeries are not always accessible to trans folks for a plethora of reasons [...] while [we] strongly [believe] that medical transition is a valid form of embodying one's trans identity, we want to think beyond the medical industrial complex because we recognize how much harm it has done to the trans community." (Baudhuin, 2023)

RITUALISE

Dr Melanie Suchet, PhD, clinical associate professor of psychology, asserted that "bodies can be encoded with visible signs of identity, such that their 'truths' are carried overtly on their skins," in her description from the Introduction of her book on the 21st Century Body (Suchet, 2009). In this context, members of the body modification community who alter themselves drastically do so in order to bring their inward selves to the surface, to express their truth. In some cultures and belief systems, aesthetic modification transcends the physical and facilitates spiritual significance. Practices like body piercing, scarification, or tattooing in spiritual rituals and rites of passage symbolize connection to their faith, community, or ancestors.[82]

It's a process of self-discovery and self-expression where the body becomes a canvas on which an individual's story is etched. The act of undergoing body modifications can be highly ritualistic in nature,[83] whether in a traditional tattooing ceremony or a contemporary procedure. Processes often involve specific rituals and symbolism which can be deeply spiritual, carrying cultural or personal significance. They serve as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, allowing individuals to connect with their inner truths and the broader universe. Some individuals view body modifications as a means of connecting with the divine or the sacred, with alterations seen as a form of divine expression, allowing embodiment of the essence of spiritual beliefs. Modifications can also be a way of transcending the limitations of the mundane world. This departure can be a form of spiritual elevation, a way of rising above the constraints of everyday life and connecting with a higher sense of purpose and truth.

EMBRACE HERITAGE

Similarly, to spiritual and ritualistic endeavours, aesthetic modifications play a vital role in preserving and celebrating cultural heritage. Body adornment and modification have a rich and diverse history throughout different cultures and time periods, often serving as a profound connection to cultural, carrying ancestral traditions and meanings[84] that resonate with contemporary individuals. Rufus C. Camphausen's book, "Return of the Tribal," takes readers on a chronological journey through the history of body adornment and modification, with historical exploration revealing that these practices have been known and practiced all over the world and at all times. From makeup and ear piercing to tattooing, scarification, and branding, practices have evolved over millennia and what was once considered on the fringe of society, from a Western perspective, is now becoming accepted as more mainstream forms of body decoration.

[82] Permanent body modifications, such as tattoos and scarification, are often chosen because of their lasting nature. These alterations serve as permanent signifiers of identity or community inclusion, symbolizing an unchanging truth about who they are. It's a way of making a lifelong commitment to their inner selves and a testament to the enduring nature of their spiritual journey.

[83] Even secular routines can become ritualized. As Daphne B, in her book Made Up, describes her reception of makeup products: "The doorbell rings. My little box has come. I've found a purpose once again, a raison d'etre: opening Little Boxes. It's like I found a new religion: shrouds, cerements, intricate cases-- the deluxe makeup I buy comes wrapped so lovingly you'd swear it was a holy relic." (B and Manley, 2021)

[84] For many, these practices are a way to indicate affiliation with a clan, tribe, or totemic group. They may also signify one's age group, social ranking, or status within a community. In some cultures, body modifications mark important life events or transitions, such as coming of age or mourning. They can also be used as protective symbols, deflecting evil and illness, or as a means of gaining entry into the other world.

(Camphausen, 1997) Even practices that were actively supressed are finding acceptance and even resurgence.[85]

But, while ancestral adornment may have been performed for religious, magical, or attractiveness-enhancing purposes, contemporary motivations expand further in diversity. Some individuals get tattoos to "mark the occasion of either a victory or defeat, [an] expression of joy or sorrow, performed as part of a ceremony or ritual and accompanied by mantras, song, and dance. The phase of the moon may determine the time for a tattoo, as may also a particular constellation of stars, or a season. Some people get themselves tattooed because of certain visions, tattoos, oaths or injunctions" (Camphausen, 1997) Motivations range from deeply spiritual and intentional choices to more spontaneous or light-hearted decisions. While some forms of body modification may appear extreme to contemporary sensibilities,[86] it's important to distinguish between practices that mark a person as an individual or as part of a group. Marks of civilization, such as tattoos that show group membership or initiation, have been used worldwide to create a sense of trust and recognition within a community. Unfortunately, the resurgence of interest in body modification practices, particularly those inspired by tribal traditions, raises significant concerns over cultural appropriation

Issues of Appropriation

Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of one culture are adopted by individuals or groups from another culture, often without proper understanding, respect, or acknowledgment of the cultural significance and history behind those elements. Camphausen's observation that many contemporary body adornment practices can be seen as modern expressions of ancient tribal customs is pertinent; while these practices may be rooted in tribal traditions, contemporary society often adopts them with altered perspectives. Camphausen notes that individuals may draw inspiration from various tribal practices, they can decide what, where, and when to apply these markings, a marked departure from traditional tribal practices, where specific markings often carried ritual and communal significance. This freedom of choice can blur the lines between respectful homage and appropriation when people adopt elements of tribal body modification without understanding or respecting their cultural origins.

CAUTION

The discussion of consent in body modification practices is multifaceted and becomes even more complex in the context of changing beauty standards, encompassing considerations of age, reversals, de-transitioning, transphobia, and the evolving aesthetic ideals of society.

Age of Intervention

One significant aspect of consent in body modification is the age at which individuals can legally and ethically make decisions about altering their bodies. In many places, there are legal age limits for certain procedures, such as tattoos, piercings, or cosmetic surgeries. However, as body modification procedures

[85] "Marks of Mana," a documentary about Pacific Islander women reclaiming traditional tattooing after the arrival of European missionaries, explores such a resurgence. The film additionally grounds a sense of history of tattooing and connections between tattooing and gender. Discussions of this documentary culminated in a temporary Gallery display at the University of Oregon Erb Memorial Union

[86] "How does your aesthetic experience (your experience of artworks, landscape, etc) depend on what culture you grew up in? This is the starting question of global Aesthetics. And the answer is straightforward: we can't just assume that artifacts are perceived everywhere and did every historical era the same way they are perceived here and now." (Nanay, 2019)

become more accessible and popular, especially among teenagers, concerns arise about the ability of young individuals to provide informed consent. Supermodel Bella Hadid has gone on record that she regrets obtaining a rhinoplasty at 14 despite obtaining commercial success as a result of her beauty post-intervention. In a cover interview with Vogue Magazine, she expressed that as an insecure teenager she disliked her large nose but now, with mature perspective, believes she "would have grown into it" and wishes she had "kept the nose of [her] ancestors." (Haskell, 2022)

De-Trans-ition

The issue of reversal and de-transitioning is particularly relevant in the context of transgender individuals, and instances of these occurrences are often cited as a means to limit access to trans-affirming healthcare. Statistically, in the UK, "a survey of 3398 attendees of a gender identity clinic found that just sixteen – about 0.47% – experienced transition-related regret. Of these, even fewer went on to actually detransition and become detransitioners." (GenderGP, 2023) Dr Jamie Anthony Lotun-Raines,[87] PhD is an English YouTuber and LGBT advocate whose videos include commentary on gender identity and other LGBTQ+ issues as well as general lifestyle topics. In his video *Dangerous Misinformation About Transitioning*, Raines confronts detransitions as non-representative of typical experience potentially dangerous to tout as illustrative. (Raines, 2023) Some trans individuals may opt for body modification procedures as part of their transition process; however, the risks of de-transitioning should not be a barrier to initial care, particularly in consideration of gender affirmations connection to mental health and well-being.

My Tattoo Says "No Ragrets"

The rising popularity of body modifications has led to the growth of the industry for reversals and removals of alterations.[88] As beauty standards shift, individuals who once embraced certain modifications may find themselves out of sync with evolving ideals. "It has been said right from the outset that the concept of ugliness, like that of beauty, is relative, not only in different cultures but also in different periods." (Eco, 2007) Umberto Eco emphasize the relativity of beauty standards, a reflection of societal norms and values rather than affixed ideal.[89] The global beauty industry has played a significant role in shaping these standards, often with a focus on clear skin and youth.[90] This fluidity underscores the importance of consent

[87] Raines, who received his PhD in Psychology from University of Essex and is himself a transgender male, often advocates for the sharing of personal experience and open discussion around gender and sexuality on his YouTube Channel (@jammidodger) but acts primarily to debunk misconceptions and limit the spread of misinformation, particularly in anecdotal evidence, correlation/causation, straw-man, and other fallacies

[88] These reversal procedures can involve lasers, surgical interventions, or other techniques. The consent here is also crucial, as individuals should have the autonomy to change their minds and return to their original appearance.

[89] In discussing the possibility of a unifying aesthetic ideal in contemporary times, Eco is unable to definitively pinpoint even a broad theme and so presents the possibility that hindsight may provide the only clarity, suggesting an art historian of the future or an explorer from outer space could potentially more objectively answer with the help of broader scope. "Our explorer from the future will no longer be able to identify the aesthetic ideal diffused by the mass media of the 20th century and beyond. He will have to surrender before the orgy of Tolerance, the total syncretism and the absolute and Unstoppable polytheism of beauty." (Eco and McEwan, 2010)

[90] But, "while certain looks come in and out of Vogue, there is one thing that has remained remarkably consistent throughout history. What underlies everything is a preference for clear skin and youth. You'll notice [it doesn't] say 'white skin,' because that's not always been the global ideal. Before the creation of a global beauty industry in the 1990s, standards for sexual attractiveness tended to vary a lot more than they do today. Not every culture in the history of humanity as valued pallor. [...] a global perspective is a difficult one to hold, particularly because aesthetics are often learned passively and through a slow process of repetition." (Kelleher, 2023)

in body modification because individuals may seek modifications to align with shifting beauty ideals or to express their unique understanding of beauty.

Media Influence

Despite the differences in result, individuals all over the world remain motivated by the concept of beauty, whatever that may mean in the context of their own society, and for many, the quest for this beauty rarely exists in pure self-motivation, often entangled with external influences and societal constructs. Deborah Harris- Moore states that: "No matter one's class standing, surgical procedures and weight loss methods are often advertised in terms of doing it for yourself as an individual right and reward, and as a means of power and social mobility. In a society that sets standards for normalcy, power, beauty, and other ideals, however, doing anything truly for yourself or even by yourself is impossible." (Harris Moore, 2014) This observation highlights the societal pressures that shape our understanding of beauty. In a world that establishes norms for beauty and power, even our desires for self-improvement are influenced by external factors. Advertisements and media often frame surgical procedures and weight loss as individual empowerment and personal rewards, yet they are embedded within a broader context of societal ideals.

Purely individual motivation remains rare, however, as even beyond socially constructed influences on the idea of beauty, external factors arise readily. Two parallel examples of this: women who received surgery at the requests of their husbands in response to upward career mobility. In *Making the Cut: How Cosmetic Surgery is Transforming Our Lives,* Anthony Elliott discusses the case of "Amanda," a western woman, who pursued breast augmentation to achieve a standard C cup. A few years later, she returned to the surgeon in order to increase her breasts several more sizes despite claiming happiness with her initial result. When probed she responded that her husband, a "CEO of a leading London financial institution, […] needed his wife to 'turn the heads of others'" (Elliott, 2008).

In an article examining the extreme Fashions of the Kardashian sisters in the lead-up to the annual Met Gala in 2019, journalist Marie LeConte raises important questions about the intersection of beauty, class, and labour, with some beauty trends often push the boundaries of what's practical and functional. LeConte's reference to women as "literally living pieces of art" speaks to the idea that contemporary beauty standards can transcend mere personal expression and become statements of status and identity. Much like Victorian aristocrats who used corsets to shape their bodies, individuals who embrace extreme beauty modifications signal that their lives and status are not tied to conventional labour. This phenomenon suggests that the pursuit of beauty can be a form of social commentary and self-expression, even though it is still deeply influenced by societal constructs.

The Money of Beauty

According to the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery National Databank, "the number of Botox procedures performed in America increased by 54 per cent between 2019 and 2020, and fillers were up by 75 per cent. The UK is the world's fastest-growing market for facial filler, and British plastic surgeons reported a 70 per cent increase in consultation requests over 2020" (Atlanta, 2022) and "Britain's non-surgical aesthetic treatment Market set to be worth 3 billion by 2024." (Day, 2020)[91]

But, while surgery itself becomes increasingly established worldwide, the types of surgery can be very location specific. Iran leads the world in rhinoplasty; eyelid surgery is common throughout Asia; and in the

[91] If the monetization of beauty and the capitalization of society exhausts you, remember that capitalism demands productivity, so you can actively rage against it while and by having a lie in.

United States (as well as most Western European countries), breast augmentation and liposuction remain the top invasive procedures. (Stein, 2015)

The decline of stigma[92] as more people pursue surgical alteration of alteration means the field of cosmetic surgery continues to evolve and become ever more prevalent. Similarly, to the advent of makeup and hair dye[93], elective surgery, once denied, hidden, or otherwise considered taboo, now no longer subsists under judgmental constraints, being discussed and sought after openly.[94] Aesthetic procedures are "considered by many to be a routine part of anti-aging regimens." (Day, 2020) The body can be edited to a greater degree and with lesser stigma than ever.

The Meaning of Beauty

With declining stigmas and increased availability and affordability, individuals from all social classes possess the ability to alter themselves to their own personal specifications. On the perfection spectrum, "medical notions of health, wellness, and normalcy have become destabilized and less attainable/through terminological slippages where health becomes operationalized; […] Youth is considered healthier than mature age, often conflating looking young with health and beauty." (Harris-Moore, 2014) What initially began as beauty being a sign of the healthy has now devolved into beauty as a prerequisite for being healthy, and happy. With the technology and technique available now, it is not unreasonable to assume that all individuals (in Western society) will be able to undergo any changes that they see fit, undergoing edits to the body document and making themselves 'beautiful' and 'healthy' and 'perfect.'

Alternatively, if all surgeries proceed to the ideal specifications, with all becoming beautiful while remaining human, this beauty will have lost its meaning[95]. In the words of Sander L. Gilman: "if everyone were cast in the same mould, there would be no such thing as beauty" (Gilman, 1998). As shown in the studies conducted by Sarwer and Ed Diener[96], success of physical alteration depends on personal satisfaction with result and not societal reception or peer-perception. Further, in *The Critique of Judgement,* Emmanuel Kant investigates the beautiful and the sublime, concluding that laws cannot be created for

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[92] We are "somewhat liberated to discuss this normal desire for physical betterment. Beauty matters used to be much murkier; once upon a time people would smear alligator dung on their faces and brush animal fat through their hair. They ingested poison and drank urine under the cover of darkness, their fumbling toward beauty kept close to the chest, a shameful secret." (Kelleher, 2023)

[93] "In 19th century America, makeup was often sold under the counter because it was considered a tool of prostitution. In the 1930s when hair dyeing was new, women got their colour done in the basements of beauty parlours so no one would see them and continued to do so for decades after; now 75% of women dye their hair. And 15 years ago, getting your teeth whitened made you a tool; now dentists throw in free whitener in the goodie bag along with the floss and toothpaste. It's actually difficult to find a toothpaste that doesn't include whitening" (Stein, 2015)

[94] To an extent. According to cosmetic surgeon Dr Amy Bandy, there are "three kinds of cosmetic procedures, though they overlap: Sexualizing (breast augmentation), normalizing (nose job), and anti-aging (face-lift); the sexualizing ones are nearly wholly public, while the ones whose purpose is to appear younger are kept quieter." (Stein, 2015)

[95] This concept of meaningless homogenized beauty remains as important today as when exemplified in the Twilight Zone episode "Number 12 Looks Just Like You", when a young girl contemplates the meaning of beauty in her society, where teenagers undergo a transformation in which each person's body and face are changed to mimic a physically attractive design chosen from a small selection of numbered models. The process gives everyone a beautiful appearance, but the main character decides not to undergo the process, concluding that everyone being beautiful is the same as being ugly, and the conformity of the process strips away individual identity. Essentially, when everyone is "beautiful", the beauty of hideousness no longer matters, only conformity to a standard. (The Twilight Zone, Episode 13, Number 12 Looks Just Like You, 1964)

[96] Separate studies, refer to earlier references within the paper and references (Dittmann, 2005) and (Cascio, 2014.)

beauty as tastes lack universality (Kant, 1914)[97]. With the advent of readily available cosmetic surgery, anyone can try to achieve their individual notion of beauty as part of a quest to increase psychological well-being. Unfortunately, ready availability paired with the media landscape and shifting aesthetic ideals can lead to a perpetual pursuit of unattainable perfection and potential Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD).[98] "Some people with BDD or body image issues consider cosmetic procedures as a way of changing their appearance [however] research shows that most people with a significant [issues] are usually dissatisfied with the outcome of surgery. For some people surgery can actually worsen their concerns about their appearance." (Callaghan, 2020)[99] According to the American Psychological Association, BDD reveals itself most prominently in the aftermath of procedures, with "BDD patients who have cosmetic surgery [experiencing no] improvement in their BDD symptoms, often asking for multiple procedures on the same or other body features" (Dittmann, 2014). The pursuit of bodily "perfection" through extreme means can be a symptom of BDD or the result of an aesthetic outside of the naturally attainable, which seems absurd to onlookers, but this passionate pursuit of decorating the living canvas of the body remains merely a quest to match the external body with the internal ideal, an outward expression of an individual's true self.[100]

FUNCTIONAL MODIFICATIONS

Functional modifications represent a distinct category within the broader realm of body alterations. Unlike aesthetic modifications, which primarily focus on enhancing appearance, functional modifications are driven by the need to restore or enhance bodily functions, serving as a critical bridge between medical necessity and the broader spectrum of body alterations. Often rooted in reconstructive need, functional modifications set the stage for broader discussions about the intersection of technology and human enhancement, often encapsulated under the term "transhumanism." Advances in medical science and technology continually push the boundaries of what is possible in terms of restoring and enhancing bodily functions; from cochlear implants that restore hearing to bionic limbs that offer unprecedented mobility. Functional modifications herald a future where humans can transcend the limitations of their natural bodies.

[97] Kant references beautiful objects in his philosophical argument, but his conclusions remain applicable to the beauty perceived in individuals (Kul-Want and Piero, 2014).

[98] Body Dysmorphic Disorder, first introduced officially in the 1987 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, involves a preoccupation with appearance beyond the norm, often resulting in the fixation interfering with other aspects of the individual's life. Current statistics from the American Psychological Association estimate 7-12% of patients pursuing cosmetic surgery suffer from BDD in some form. (Dittmann, 2005) Overall, the want for cosmetic surgery remains normal, but in the case of BDD and the unyielding pursuit of unattainable perfection, surgery indicates a tremendous underlying issue of self-esteem. When the patient cannot achieve their personal goals of identity psychologically, the physical changes become meaningless.

[99] For further information on Body Dysmorphic Disorder refer to Lauren Callaghan's Body Image Problems

[100] Psychologist David Sarwer, PhD, director of the Education, Weight, and Eating Disorders Program at the University of Pennsylvania and associate professor of psychology at the Center for Human Appearance at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, works with cosmetic surgeons in order to combat BDD and refer these patients to mental health professionals. Surgeons account for their patients' internal motivations in order to ensure successful results. If the patient undergoes surgery to please someone other than themselves, or they hold unrealistic expectations of outcome, such as expecting surgery to end persistent personal problems, then surgery cannot function in place of psychological therapy, and the patient should pursue alternate methods. (Dittmann, 2005)

TRANSHUMANISM

Transhumanism is an intellectual and philosophical movement that explores the potential of merging humans with technology to enhance and transcend human capabilities, envisioning a future where technology plays a central role in reshaping the human condition, extending life, enhancing cognitive abilities, and even allowing individuals to modify their physical forms. The essence of transhumanism lies in the idea that the human body and mind can be augmented and improved upon through the integration of advanced technologies.

One of the most prominent examples of transhumanist technology is the integration of microchips or nanotechnology into the human body, used for a wide range of purposes, from enhancing memory and cognitive functions to monitoring health in real-time. Elon Musk's Neuralink is developing brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) that aim to enable direct communication between the human brain and external devices.

Implantable magnets have gained popularity among transhumanists, particularly in the body modification community. These magnets are typically inserted into the fingertips and allow individuals to sense electromagnetic fields, giving them an extra sensory perception of sorts.

QR code tattoos, while not yet widespread, exemplify the fusion of technology and body art. These tattoos contain scannable QR codes that can link to various digital content, such as a personal website, medical information, or even cryptocurrency wallets. They represent a direct link between the physical body and the digital world.

Floridi proposed the 4th Revolution,[101] connected with the work of Alan Turing, in the understanding that our role as agents in this society is shaped by advancing technologies. (Floridi, 2016a) Confronted with technology which literally alters the body for interaction with digital Onlife experience, Transhumanism ensures the validity of Floridi's assertions. It additionally raises profound questions about the nature of the human body as a document within the realm of LIS, challenging conventional notions of what constitutes human identity, memory, and knowledge storage. Transhumanist technologies, like microchips and brain-computer interfaces, have the potential to transform how information is accessed, stored, and shared within the human body. In the words of Mark O'Connell, transhumanism envisions a future where humans become increasingly integrated with technology, blurring the lines between biology and machinery: "I am part machine: encoded in the world, encrypted in its strange and irresistible signals. I look at my hands as they type, their hardware of bone and flesh, and I look at the images of these words as they appear on the screen, my screen: a feedback loop of input and output, an algorithmic pattern of signal and transmission. The data, the code, the communication." (O'Connell, 2018) This merger between humans and technology challenges our understanding of human dignity and the boundaries of the human experience. It forces us to consider how information and knowledge are encoded within this new hybrid entity, where the biological and the digital coexist.

[101] The fourth revolution is based on a classic interpretation of three previous revolutions in our self-understanding. The first one is Copernicus we thought we were at the center of the universe and then we discover that there was not a case and, of course, we were forced to reconsider who we were and our role in the bigger picture. We retrenched and we thought that at least we were at the center of the animal kingdom. Of course, Darwin came and we realized that that centrality was also threatened and we had to reconsider, again, role on this particular planet. The third revolution it's so called because of Freud and that was also a matter of reconsidering our centrality in the world of rationality. There's much more going on in our minds then we thought at the beginning. (Floridi, 2016a)

For LIS, the perspectives of scholars like Michael S. Brookes offer insights into the evolving relationship between humans and information. Brookes acknowledges the impact of modern science on human dignity[102] and identity, highlighting how advancements in medical science and cosmology have expanded our understanding of the human condition. He underscores the idea that the human body, with its complex biology and consciousness, remains intricately connected to the information it processes. The blurred boundary between objective and subjective description resonates with the transhumanist discourse, challenging tradition, exploring the integration of technology into the realm of human consciousness and experience. (Brookes, 1980)

Modifications to Make Up for the Missing

The human body often serves as a canvas for stories of resilience, adaptation, and triumph over adversity. Alterations in response to physical loss, such as prosthetics for limb amputations and cochlear implants for hearing loss, exemplify the capacity of individuals to overcome challenges and regain functionality.

Prosthetics are artificial limbs designed to replace lost or amputated body parts. They have a long history, dating back to ancient civilizations, but have evolved significantly in recent decades due to advancements in materials and technology. Prosthetic limbs are not just functional tools but also deeply personal expressions of identity and adaptability by offering individuals who have lost limbs the opportunity to regain mobility and functionality. Modern prosthetic limbs are often custom-designed to fit the individual's residual limb, providing a high degree of comfort and control. Beyond physical restoration, prosthetics can contribute to emotional and psychological healing, allowing individuals to reclaim a sense of normalcy and control over their bodies, reducing feelings of loss and disability. These modifications can even be personalized with various designs and integrated with advanced technologies, becoming statements of personal style, resilience, and aesthetic taste.

Cochlear implants are electronic devices designed to restore hearing to individuals with severe hearing loss or deafness, working by directly stimulating the auditory nerve, bypassing damaged parts of the inner ear and revolutionising the lives of many individuals with hearing impairments.[103] Individuals who would otherwise be profoundly deaf which can significantly enhance quality of life, particularly for children born with hearing loss as the implants can facilitate language development at an early age, opening opportunities for education and social interaction. The use of cochlear implants has sparked discussions within the Deaf community about identity and culture, however, with some arguing that cochlear implants can be seen as a form of medical intervention that challenges the notion of Deafness as a cultural identity.[104]

Both prosthetics and cochlear implants have substantial positive impacts on the mental health and well-being of individuals who have experienced physical loss. These alterations can alleviate feelings of grief, depression, and social isolation, particularly when accompanying the loss of a limb or hearing. By restoring functionality and promoting a sense of control over one's body, these technologies contribute to improved self-esteem and mental health outcomes. They also foster a sense of belonging and inclusion within society, reducing the psychological burden associated with physical loss.

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[102] "Human dignity has suffered greatly from modern science." (Brookes, 1980)

[103] This is not to say that such implants are necessary or even suggested for all individuals. Many members of the deaf community prefer not to undergo such alterations and their choices, made in an informed manner, should be respected.

[104] Please consider: bodily autonomy. Some individuals may choose to receive an implant, some may reject it. Personal decisions about modifications made to the body are just that—personal.

The Future of Humanity

Transhumanism, a movement and philosophy that advocates for the enhancement of human capabilities through technology, raises profound questions about the future of humanity. It envisions a future where humans can transcend their biological limitations, achieve extraordinary feats, and redefine what it means to be human. In this context, adaptability and additional utility become central themes, echoing the idea of humans as documents—ever-evolving and editable.

Transhumanism envisions a future where humans have the ability to adapt to changing environments and challenges more rapidly and effectively through biological, cognitive, and mental modifications. Through genetic engineering and biotechnological advancements, humans could enhance their physical and cognitive abilities. For example, gene editing might allow individuals to resist diseases, adapt to extreme climates, or even enhance their intellectual capacities. Brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) and neural enhancements could further boost cognitive functions, enabling humans to process information more quickly, make better decisions, and learn at an accelerated pace, an adaptability potentially vital in addressing complex global challenges. Technologies like neurofeedback and mood-regulating implants could additionally aid in adaptation to stressful situations and maintenance of psychological well-being. Anti-aging therapies and regenerative medicine potentially extend human lifespans significantly.

Technologies like bionic eyes and cochlear implants are already enhancing human senses and could become more sophisticated, allowing perception of the world in entirely new ways.[105] Advancements in robotics and exoskeletons could empower individuals with disabilities to lead more active lives and these technologies, too, could offer additional utility, enabling mobility and physical capabilities beyond what's naturally possible.

The connection to the idea of humans as documents lies in the malleability and editability of the human experience. Much like how a document can be revised and improved, transhumanism proposes that humans can edit and enhance their own biology and capabilities. This vision aligns with the idea that humans are not static but constantly evolving entities, capable of rewriting their narratives through technological interventions.

INFORMATIONAL TATTOOS TO DOCUMENT MEMORY EXPERIENCE

Tattoos have transcended their traditional roles as mere body adornments and have evolved into powerful means of documenting memory and experience. This transformation of tattoos into repositories of personal history, emotions, and stories connects deeply with the notion of humans as living documents.[106] The concept of informational tattoos is not only about aesthetics but also about creating a tangible record of one's journey through life. An example of this concept can be found in the trend of mastectomy scar tattoos, where individuals, primarily women, who have overcome breast cancer use tattoos reclaim their bodies.

David Allen, a Chicago-based tattoo artist, has been at the forefront of this transformative practice. His work involves etching beautiful flowers in bloom onto the chests of women who want to ceremoniously mark their survival and reclaim the beauty of their bodies. "There's transformation and healing, but the

[105] Ted Chiang's story, "Liking What You See: A Documentary," explores the consequences of a neural modification that eliminates the perception of physical beauty. This narrative underscores the idea that while transhumanist enhancements aim to provide additional utility, they can have unexpected and far-reaching effects on social and interpersonal dynamics.

[106] "Memory plays a crucial role in the construction of personal identity." (Floridi, 2011)

women do all the work," notes Allen. His approach emphasizes that the process of getting these tattoos is as crucial as the final result. The women guide him through their emotional journey. Allen sees his role as more of a project manager in this deeply personal process. The tattoos themselves are more than just ink on skin; they are a testament to the women's strength and resilience. (Pogue, 2019)

Informational tattoos represent a powerful form of documentation, serving as a visual archive of personal narratives, resilience, and healing. This practice aligns with the idea that humans are living documents, constantly updating and revising their stories. Tattoos, in this context, become not only body art but also a medium through which individuals document and celebrate their life experiences.

CASE STUDY: EL TRUCHAN

El Truchan, 47F, is a multi-award winning, Level 4 Accredited Microblading, Permanent Makeup, Scalp Micro Pigmentation (SMP), Medical Tattoo & Medical Micropigmentation, Micro-needling & Plasma Fibroblast Specialist; and one of the UK and International leading experts in Permanent Cosmetics. She holds qualifications in Permanent Cosmetics, Scalp Micropigmentation and Medical Tattooing as well as an International Accreditation from The Society of Permanent Cosmetics Professionals; and been performing procedures since 2014. She is a member of SPCP and the Royal Society of Medicine. Dedicated to Permanent Cosmetics, SMP, Skin Aesthetics & Medical Tattooing, El doesn't perform any other types of treatments.

In her semi-structured interview, El touches on the influence of social media on beauty standards and how it has accelerated trends in aesthetic procedures. She notes that lockdowns have led to an increase in facial procedures, possibly due to the prevalence of video calls.[107]

> "It's going to have a long the impact, long term impact on all of us. But I don't think it's just the lockdowns, I think it's just the progress of technology, of everything being so convenient. And then with just you and the device. So, you don't really have needs for real interactions anymore as much for physical interactions. […] A lot of standard human interactions go to remove to our observations of people, the real faces, and the real body shapes and you know, real skin colours and marks, scars, freckles, it's really removed from our daily lives because everything is filtered or blurred out. […] People see themselves on the screen. They like 'oh my god, I need this. I need that' because they look at themselves rather than other people. So much. So, because they see themselves a lot, it's like spending the whole day in the mirror looking for faults on you."

The interview delves into the concept of editing humans through permanent makeup and aesthetic procedures. El explains that some individuals seek these procedures as a form of self-expression and empowerment, while others view them as restorative treatments. She provides examples of clients who have documented their experiences, particularly those who have lost features and found comfort in restoration. The discussion focuses on the significant impact of procedures like scalp micropigmentation, eyebrow restoration, and nipple and areola tattoos, especially for individuals who have experienced loss or

[107] A sentiment echoed in Ellen Atalanta's *Not Ugly, Just Poor:* "our faces have become our most valuable commodity. Thanks to social media, selfies and Zoom calls, our appearance is always front and centre and it has become something we 'should' invest in." (Atlanta, 2022)

medical conditions. El highlights the emotional and psychological benefits of these treatments, often helping clients regain their confidence and sense of self.

> "The work I provide is quite miniscule is just a small adjustment to match what your daily requirements are for being comfortable with yourself. […] It's almost like trying to match your own vision of yourself."

> "Impact can be really, really significant. Same with nipple and areola, restorative treatments […]; once the restoration is performed, they're getting their confidence back and their even their sexuality back.[108] And they feel like they can be how they used to be before the loss. […] For those women there is additional whole layer it's almost like a completion of winning against the cancer […] It's a completion of their journey. And part of their actual, quite often, mental health recovery from the from the trauma as well."

The interview also touches on online bullying and criticism related to beauty standards. El emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and addresses the growing concern of body dysmorphia among those exposed to unrealistic beauty ideals on social media. El discusses professional ethics in the context of permanent makeup and aesthetic procedures, emphasizing the importance of informed consent and ethical considerations. She reflects on the future of these procedures, considering advancing technologies and evolving client preferences. Lastly, El discusses the aging process and the desire of many professional women to preserve their youthful appearance through various procedures, such as Botox.

El Truchan's interview provides insights into the world of permanent makeup and aesthetic procedures, particularly focusing on their reconstructive and restorative aspects. Her emphasis on the importance of experienced professionals and informed decision-making underscores the ethical considerations in the field, emphasising the need for practitioners to prioritise informed consent and responsible practices. The evolving nature of beauty standards and advancing technologies in the field pose interesting questions about the future of aesthetic interventions.

The interview additionally highlights the diverse motivations behind aesthetic interventions, ranging from self-expression to restoration. El's examples of clients who have regained confidence and a sense of self through procedures like nipple and areola tattoos emphasize the psychological and emotional impact of these treatments.

The discussion on online bullying and body dysmorphia draws attention to the potential negative consequences of unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media. El's insights into these issues underscore the importance of promoting self-acceptance and body positivity.

Full Interview Transcript can be found in the Appendices (Mack and Truchan, 2023)

INFORMATIONAL TATTOOS TO PROVIDE DOCUMENTED INFORMATION

Beyond their role in personal expression and storytelling, tattoos can function as traditional documents, conveying critical information related to an individual's health and legal status. This dual purpose, while

[108] This affirmation in not limited to this realm. Alexander Taschioglou mentioned wanting torso tattoos as part of his healing and transition journey as well: "I want to get tattoos mainly. No shame in scarring at all, but I personally see that as passing gold. Right. So, I want to cover that." (Mack and Taschioglou, 2023)

serving practical and potentially life-saving functions, also raises complex issues of consent, privacy, and ethics.

Medical alert tattoos have gained recognition as valuable tools, often displaying essential medical information, such as allergies to medications, chronic illnesses like diabetes, or even the need for life-saving treatments like an epinephrine injection for severe allergic reactions. They are essentially functional documents that provide medical practitioners with vital patient information when traditional forms of identification, like medical bracelets or ID cards, might not be available or visible. These tattoos can be lifesaving in emergency situations when a person is unconscious or unable to communicate their medical history. They turn the human body into a document that carries critical information.

Consent is a central consideration in medical alert tattoos. It's crucial that individuals fully understand the implications of getting such a tattoo, including the permanence of the decision, and informed consent ensures that the tattoo serves its intended purpose without infringing on personal autonomy.

INFORMATIONAL TATTOOS TO TURN PEOPLE INTO DOCUMENTS

Conversely, prison tattoos represent a different form of informational tattoos, often involuntarily[109]. These tattoos can carry significant criminal information such as an individual's gang affiliation, criminal record, or even details of their crimes. They serve as a form of identity and status within the prison system, but while they can be functional in the sense of conveying information, they often come with severe social stigmas and legal consequences once a person re-enters society. In this sense, they can function as negative documents, potentially hindering rehabilitation and reintegration. Typically, not a matter of choice but rather a result of coercion or necessity within the prison environment, the context of these modifications positions consent as a significant concern, as individuals may be forced or pressured into receiving these tattoos.[110]

HOW THE BODY AFFECTS RECORDS

In the exploration of the human body as a document at the macro level, this dissertation delved into the profound ways in which individuals can use their bodies as canvases for large-scale modifications and alterations. These modifications, whether driven by aesthetics, culture, trauma, or medical necessity, highlight the body's capacity to serve as a powerful and multifaceted record. Our journey through these transformations underscores the central theme of this paper: the human as document. From gender-affirming surgeries that reshape identity and require corresponding changes in identification and legal documents to extreme body modifications reflecting societal subversion, alterations to the body transcend mere physical changes. They become entries in the ongoing narrative of a person's life, reflecting their experiences, desires, and affiliations. The body, as a document, speaks volumes about the human experience, both individually and collectively.

Transitioning from exploration of both micro and macro modifications, attention is given to the reciprocal relationship between traditional documents and humans, examining how documents, such as IDs, passports, and medical records, impact individuals in myriad ways, from their sense of identity and citizenship to their access to essential services.

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[109] If this dissertation should end up online, it will not need six degrees, the Holocaust reference is right here.

[110] For further information on the legacy and longevity of practice, refer to *Tattoos as Punishment: An Illustrated History of Tattooing in Japan* by Shahan.

RECORDS AFFECTING THE BODY

Another crucial dimension of the human as a document: the profound influence of traditional documents and records on humans. Information and categorisations contained within official records can have a significant affect, impacting sense of self, access to essential services, and place within society.

HOW RECORDS AFFECT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Records, in their various forms, exert a profound influence on personal experiences, shaping identity, connecting to the past, and occasionally revealing the hidden complexities of heritage.

Revisiting the notion that trans surgeries are fundamentally similar to cisgender surgeries, differing primarily in who seeks them and the barriers they encounter; this concept underscores the importance of medical records in the transgender experience. Records related to hormone therapy, surgical procedures, and legal name changes are essential for transgender individuals seeking to align their physical bodies with their gender identities; however, these records can also become sources of gatekeeping, as medical professionals or bureaucratic systems may demand certain criteria or documentation before providing access to gender-affirming treatments, exemplifies how personal experiences are intertwined with medical records and the healthcare system. Outside the trans experience, personal medical history can influence personal experiences as records of vaccinations, illnesses, and treatments are not only important for healthcare but also serve as a historical account of physical well-being. These records can influence health decisions and can even shape personal perceptions of one's own body.

Beyond medical history, cultural records play a pivotal role in shaping personal experiences. These records encompass a wide range of materials, from historical texts to artifacts and oral traditions. For individuals connected to specific cultures or ethnicities, these records serve as a bridge to their heritage and offer a sense of belonging, influencing cultural practices and celebrations to the foods consumed and languages spoken. The preservation and accessibility of cultural records significantly impacts how people connect with their roots and the richness of their cultural heritage.

Familial records, particularly family trees and genealogical records, provide a fascinating insight into the personal experiences of individuals. Family histories, shared through documents and stories passed down through generations, give individuals a sense of continuity and connection to their ancestors. These records can illuminate the paths taken by family members, their accomplishments, and the challenges they faced.

One fascinating area where these concepts intersect is in the world of genealogy. Investigating family histories and constructing family trees often involves delving into historical records and archives. However, this pursuit can raise questions of confidentiality, particularly when it comes to uncovering sensitive or undisclosed information about family members. Issues of consent, privacy, and the ethical responsibilities of genealogists come to the forefront. In this context, we will explore a case study involving an interview with a genealogist affiliated with the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between records and personal experiences.

CASE STUDY: DEBORAH HERSHEY

Deborah White Hershey, certified genealogist, is the CEO of Generations Remembered, a genealogical research company, and an active member of the Harrisburg Chapter National Society for the Daughters of

the American Revolution (NSDAR/ DAR). Her expertise sheds light on how records and documentation can deeply affect one's sense of identity, access to privileges, and participation in society.

Deborah's extensive experience in genealogy, spanning several decades, underscores the personal and meaningful nature of this pursuit. She emphasizes that genealogy goes beyond DNA testing, as it involves uncovering names and connections, offering a more comprehensive understanding of one's heritage.

One significant aspect Deborah discusses is the role of genealogy in tracing lineage to the American Revolution. This process requires meticulous documentation and evidence collection, often involving tombstone records and alternative sources. Becoming a member of organizations like the National Society for the Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR/DAR) involves strict requirements and extensive documentation. She points out the importance of preserving family histories through documentation, highlighting the value of non-typical document types such as tombstone records and familial Bibles. This preservation extends to national efforts, including digitization and microfilm initiatives, to make historical records accessible.

> "You'd be surprised what you find on tombstones. […] The importance of documents: that's the only way you're going to be able to prove a line is if you find the documentation, and there are so many different sources. I go to historical societies, state archives. We're working on a project right now for my group, collecting Bible records. You know, a lot of families have old Bibles, and sometimes that's the only record of a birth or a death."

Privacy and ethical considerations are paramount in genealogical research. Deborah emphasizes the need for trust between researchers and individuals providing sensitive family histories. She ensures the privacy of individuals by safeguarding their personal data, especially when dealing with living or recently deceased relatives. The future of genealogical research is heavily influenced by technology and digital records. The digitization of documents and DNA testing advancements are shaping the field. DNA testing, in particular, offers new ways to connect familial dots and validate genealogical research.

> "With DAR, the DNA testing has just come into being with the group in the last say, 10 years. But I think a lot of people are trying to connect through 23andme, FTDNA, Ancestry DNA, Living DNA, because in the UK, living DNA is probably one of the bigger ones. And I think when they find out who they are through their DNA, now they think it's more.... they get more interested in joining that lineage society to prove who they are. Because a DNA does not necessarily give you that connection"
>
> "[Documentation is] the most important part. […] You have to collect the documents to prove these lines."

Deborah's advice to budding genealogists stresses the significance of accurate document practices. She highlights the potential discrepancies in names due to clerical errors or misspellings and the importance of being thorough in documentation. She also encourages individuals to embrace the personal and provable nature of genealogical records.

Deborah Hershey's interview provides valuable insights into the world of genealogy and its profound effects on individuals and families. Through her experience, she demonstrates how records and

documentation can influence one's identity, sense of belonging, and ethical responsibilities within the field of genealogical research.

Full Interview Transcript can be found in the Appendices (Mack and Hershey, 2023)

CASE STUDY: AARON VAN HORN

Aaron VanHorn, 31M, is the product of a teen pregnancy and was given for adoption. His biological parents stayed together, producing four additional children: two full siblings and two half siblings (one from his father and one from his mother), a family he knows but is not integrated within. The familial situation retained full transparency throughout his life; he always knew he was adopted and it has been a permanent self-identifier. Aaron VanHorn's interview provides a unique perspective on how adoption and family documentation can influence one's sense of identity and belonging.

One notable aspect of Aaron's interview is the theme of transparency in adoption. From the beginning, he knew about his adoption, which has allowed him to maintain an open and non-stigmatized view of the process. He appreciates this transparency, emphasizing that adoption should not be something to be ashamed of but rather a natural part of life.

> "[Being adopted] was a big part of my identity and still, obviously, still is, but when I was a kid, it was something I was super proud about […] It can really feel like a superpower. But it also, like, something cool like something that was like mine"

Aaron touches upon the idea of nature versus nurture, acknowledging that while genetics do play a role in identity, his knowledge of his biological siblings has had a significant impact on his sense of self and family. His relationship with his adoptive family and biological relatives highlights the complexities of navigating multiple family dynamics, challenges, and opportunities.

The interview delves into the importance of disclosure in adoption. Aaron suggests that there should be legal or ethical guidelines around disclosing information about biological relatives. He recognizes that closed adoptions may have their reasons, but transparency in adoption can ultimately benefit the individuals involved.

> "I'm very, very thankful, very happy that it's something I've always been able to process growing up and communication between the family stayed open."
>
> "I think there should at least be ethical guidelines [surrounding disclosure of biological relations]. Maybe that's just because of my own experience where nothing's ever really been hidden from me. I've never had to go digging for anything. We're just having it be so open and honest. It's just so.... it just feels it's just very natural. It's just like, why would you hide that it's just part of their identity. It's not something to be ashamed of."
>
> "What a burden to give somebody [to tell them of have them find out late in life]. Where, when you're young, you can process it or you can process it in a different way, but when you're older, you might not have as many family members around to give you like insight or context or, you know, your biological parents could be long gone by that point. And so, you're really just going to be missing out on a

> lot of, it's just going to be something that'll, that'll be like kind of like a little like some in the back of your head, like I could have known this whole time, like I could have reached out, I could have talked to them."

Aaron's discussion of the stigma surrounding adoption is noteworthy. He stresses that adoption should not be stigmatized and advocates for a more accepting and open view of the process. "I only ever encountered misconceptions once, and it's with my very lovable doofus of a roommate."

He touches on the topic of designer babies and how advances in genetic testing may shape future conversations about family and identity. The interview also includes personal reflections on Aaron's unique family situation and his coping mechanisms as a child, including seeking relatable stories in movies. He provides recommendations for books and movies that touch on themes related to family, identity, and adoption.

> "I think I have coped incredibly well. When I when I was a kid, my coping was trying to look for similar situations to mine and like movies, because that's what I identified with most. So, like in The Fox and the Hound. The fox is adopted by that old lady and then is, in turn, abandoned at the end when she can no longer take care of him."
>
> "As a kid I coped by watching that and being like 'me too!' be like 'that's what happened to me' […] I'm a sucker for an adoption story. And so, I would always look for my story reflected in that sort of way. And I would use that as kind of like a bounce board for myself and being like, Yeah, but like I can, like, I can accept it like it's, it's fine. My family still loves me."
>
> "My parents actually picked me"

Aaron VanHorn's interview offers a candid and insightful exploration of how documentation, transparency, and lived experiences intersect in the context of adoption and family dynamics. His perspective adds depth to the discussion of identity and belonging within the realm of adoption and underscores the importance of openness and acceptance in this process.

Full Interview Transcript can be found in the Appendices (Mack and VanHorn, 2023)

CASE STUDY: CATY BROWN

Caty Brown, 60F, is the product of a sperm doner during a time when this was highly stigmatized. The revelation of her biological origins did not come about until she was in her 30s, but through DNA testing services she has been able to connect with a multitude of her half siblings and additionally has membership in an active Facebook Group: The Club Thumb Society, which creates community for individuals with Brachydactyly type D, a genetic trait leading to the appearance of clubbed or "fat" thumbs. Her interview provides a fascinating perspective on how records, genetics, and social experiences intersect to shape one's identity and sense of belonging. Her unique situation as a product of a sperm donor and her connection with her half-siblings through DNA testing services offer valuable insights into these dynamics.

One prominent theme in Caty's interview is the importance of genetic documentation and shared traits in forming a sense of identity. Her participation in the "Club Thumb Society" on Facebook, a group for individuals with Brachydactyly type D (clubbed thumbs), demonstrates how a shared genetic trait can

create a sense of community and shared identity. This is particularly relevant as her half-siblings share this distinctive trait, and it has played a significant role in their sense of belonging to a unique family group.

> "There's a whole thing, called The Club Thumb Society […] 3,000 of us from all over the world. […] My biological father, he didn't have them, but his son and his granddaughter have them. And that's […] what made me realise, confirmed, who my biological half-brother is because he had fat thumbs. […] It definitely made me feel more connected to [my half sibling]. Because it was an anomaly."

The interview further delves into the secrecy and ethical considerations surrounding sperm donation during the 1960s. Caty's story of her biological father being a doctor who secretly donated sperm to several families sheds light on the historical context of sperm donation and the ethical concerns surrounding confidentiality.

> "They would have another doctor donate his sperm. And that's what they used to impregnate you. […] They didn't really think of it non-ethically, because they were all physicians. […] [My biological father] was doing it because he really felt the value of seeing women give birth and have a family. But, interestingly enough, my biological father wrote an article about this, that my brother Jeff found, talking about the ethics of it and why it was kept so secret is because: 1. it was in the 60s, 2. Especially in Catholicism it was considered. well, we're all bastard children. And the doctors did would be considered adultery. [Even though no fornication or physical intimacy] That's how the Catholic Church would see it. So that's one of the reasons we realised they kept it really secret. And times were just very different."

The method by which Caty was informed of her genetic origins and the life stage when the information was revealed raises questions about transparency in family relationships and the responsibility of parents to inform their children about their genetic heritage. Caty's experience for herself contrasted with both her parents experience and her informing of her own children highlights the societal shift toward transparency and openness in discussing genetic origins, contrasting with the secrecy of previous generations.

> "[I was] 30. So, my parents were going through a divorce and I think it was the last little punch to my dad, because they were never going to tell us."

> "My mom said she got the files from the nurse once the doctor retired, but she burned the notes and I never believed that, but apparently, she did. But little beknown to them: they didn't know that Ancestry DNA was going to come out, and we're all gonna figure it out anyway. So, I did that. And that's how I found my first half-brother Jeff. He turns out to be the third child of the biological father, who was the doctor […] and he's the one with the fat thumbs, so that kind of connected us. And interestingly, I met him"

> "Then Jeff told me about his two sisters. And then right after that, we found one more and then they all started popping in because it was right after Christmas time. It was like everyone was getting the test [23andme or some DNA/genealogical equivalent]"

Touching upon the importance of discussing genetics and health with children, Caty emphasizes the responsibility of parents to inform their children about any genetic conditions or health-related information that may affect them in the future, stressing the ethical dilemmas and imperatives related to genetic testing in context of the potential breach of confidentiality.

> "We found out who the sperm donor was, before my dad passed. And because this was very sensitive to my dad, we kept it hush hush, never talked about it and didn't tell our kids. And then my dad passed. […] And it was so funny [to inform the kids]. It was such a big deal to us, keeping it a secret this whole time and making sure you didn't slip out. And both my kids, […] it's been it's a very common thing now, but the circumstance of it was very different back then"

> "One of the reasons I wanted to find out who my biological father was: I wanted [to know] what's in the family gene pool that I should be worried about? You know, is there Alzheimer's? Heart issues? Is there, you know, some sort of disease that I need to be aware of? And that's really why one of the main reasons I wanted to connect, so yes, for that reason, I think it's important to tell [children] and to I think, just in our world, now, we just are more transparent. You know, I just think that that's just the nature of our job is, as we've gotten, as time has gone on, we've just become more transparent. There's no reason for it not to be."

Caty reflects on the impact of her unique family situation on her personal growth and self-identity, highlighting the importance of nuclear and extended family in shaping identity, emphasizing that genetics alone do not define a person.

> "My family I grew up with is, obviously, my family. My father is obviously my father, my mother's obviously my mother. But it is really interesting to have this other side."

Caty Brown's interview provides a thought-provoking exploration of how records, genetics, and social experiences influence identity and belonging. Her story highlights the significance of genetic traits, transparency in family relationships, and the evolving ethical considerations in the context of genetic testing and donor conception.

Full Interview Transcript can be found in the Appendices (Mack and Brown, 2023)

CASE COMPARISON

Aaron and Caty experienced radically different levels of transparency surrounding the situations of biological family and social familial structure, with Aaron having full knowledge and lifelong transparency that contributed to the development of his identity as he grew up and Caty finding out about her biological father/sperm doner at a later stage in life, challenging the identity she had cultivated when ignorant of the information. For both individuals, genetic heritage had a profound impact on their sense of identity, and the embracing of both biological and social family lead to an extended structure of community support.

Both interviews touched on the significance of shared genetic traits in overtly physical and more abstract ways. Aaron noted that despite being raised separately, he and his biological brother share the same walk,[111] with Caty similarly noting that, besides the more obvious thumb resemblance, her biological siblings shared mental similarities that she would not have expected due to being raised in more varied environments.[112]

Aaron and Caty's interviews highlight the diverse ways in which familial records and transparency can shape individuals' experiences and identities. While both interviews touch on the importance of genetic records, the impact of transparency, and the influence of familial dynamics, the specific contexts of adoption and sperm donation lead to distinct narratives and perspectives.

RECORDING THE BODY

In the age of social media, the human body has become a canvas for self-expression, aspiration, and identity construction, with digital platforms and changing cultural beauty standards profoundly influencing perception and documentation of the body.

In 2019, Jia Tolentino coined the term 'Instagram face' to describe a phenomenon that has permeated social media, a face that emerges from the combined effects of filters, fillers, reality television, makeup, and the relentless pursuit of an ideal. This ideal, as described by Tolentino, appears strikingly uniform: a heart-shaped face, plump skin without visible pores, high cheekbones, and cat-like eyes. It's a face that gazes at you with a coy yet blank expression, an ideal that is both alluring and unsettling. This face remains whit but somehow "ambiguously ethnic," exemplifying the complex interplay of cultural influences and personal identity in the digital age (Kelleher, 2023).

The rise of social media and the prevalence of filters and editing tools have given rise to what can be called an "augmented reality" of beauty. This virtual realm is less dynamic and less authentic than reality itself, taking the already flattened representation of a photograph and further distorting, creating an abstraction of an ideal. In this context, the body becomes a canvas on which individuals paint an altered reality, one that is often disconnected from their authentic selves (Kelleher, 2023). The obsession with physical beauty in the context of cosmetic transformations-- makeup, non-surgical cosmetic procedures, and even tattoos-- are explored as tools individuals use to get closer to an elusive ideal. While some opt for these procedures for gender affirmation or medical reasons[113], most are motivated by the desire to halt the aging process. By injecting toxins to the skin, these practices attempt to "embalm the living," preserving a momentary glimpse of idealized beauty (Kelleher, 2023).

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[111] "After like getting to know my biological siblings realising maybe it was incredible to realise how similar we all are, despite living very different lives […] me and my biological brother, we have the same kind of walk, like we walk very similarly. Which is weird. […] When I first started meeting them, and hanging out with them, we were walking somewhere and my sister took the video from behind. It was so strange to watch. Because just naturally, we both have the same stride." (Mack and VanHorn, 2023)

[112] "One of the very interesting things is everybody is very science minded. I mean, in knowing the careers that everybody went through, we have a Chitogenisist, we have a geophysicist, we have two environmental conservationists, one is a park ranger and the other one studied all the water in Wisconsin, all the lakes and streams. And, and I would say one of the common things with that is the love of nature. And I mean, there's a lot of adventure and travel but all a lot within the within nature. We've got hikers and backpackers and canoers. So, that with a science mind has been really interesting, a common thread. So, when we, a few times, we've gotten together, it's been really interesting to discover some of those things" (Mack and Brown, 2023)

[113] Botox had been shown useful for treating migraines, severe sweating, and lazy eye

To delve deeper into the complexities of aesthetics, the works of Susan Sontag[114] and Umberto Eco deserve consideration. Sontag's exploration of the myths humans create to cope with disease and her focus on stripping away these myths to reveal the significance of illness resonate with the modern obsession with cosmetic alterations and the "Instagram face" (Sontag, 2009). Eco's examination of caricature as a form of comic exaggeration and the transformation of the sublime into the vulgar offers valuable insights into the distortion of beauty ideals (Eco, 2007). In further examinations into the impact of social media on body documentation, these perspectives illuminate the intricate relationship between the digital world, personal identity, and the ever-evolving standards of beauty.

EXPLORATIONS OF COSMETIC SURGERY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Cosmetic surgery has been a prominent theme in popular culture, often presented through various forms of media including shows like *Dr 90210*, which offered viewers a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of Beverly Hills plastic surgeons, revealing the procedures, motivations, and transformations of their clients.[115] Online, YouTuber Luxeria's analysis of these reality TV shows, along with *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM), provides valuable insight into how cosmetic surgery and beauty ideals were portrayed in the media and how attitudes may have shifted significantly even in the decade since original air dates. These shows often framed aesthetic alterations as a path to success, framing contestants' willingness to undergo alteration as a commitment to both self and career. The pressure to conform to beauty ideals, as portrayed on ANTM and similar programs, reflects the broader societal emphasis on physical appearance and its implications for personal and professional advancement.

It's important to recognize that these portrayals of cosmetic surgery on television often align with the concept of "augmented reality" previously discussed. The medium of television, like social media, presents a flattened and idealized version of reality. While it offers a glimpse into the allure of aesthetic transformations, it simultaneously obscures the truth about the physical and emotional realities of these procedures (Kelleher, 2023).

THE RISE OF INFLUENCE

The advent of social media has ushered in the era of influencer culture, where individuals leverage their personal brand and expertise to amass a following and monetize online presence. This phenomenon, closely tied to the beauty industry, has had profound implications for societal perceptions of beauty, the monetization of appearance, and the blurring of lines between authenticity and influence. It is crucial to recognize that while inclusivity has expanded with democratized platforms, the climb to influencer status often begins with privilege. Those who can invest the time, resources,[116] and effort into producing content

[114] In Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphor, Susan Sontag delves into the mythology that humans use to cope with disease, which can distort the truth and isolate the patient. Stripping away the myth and presenting the significance of disease as it has affected cultures through the centuries, Sontag looks past the literary Beauty the less aesthetically pleasing face of Truth (Sontag, 2009)

[115] Shows like *Bridalplasty* and *The Swan* took the showcasing of surgical motivations and results further through the inclusion of competition elements

[116] Primarily monetary resources, particularly in the context of being able to afford cosmetic alteration. "Unless we work to change things, we are approaching a future in which our beauty standard evolves to an ever-expensive ideal, further increasing the opportunity gap between classes. 'I'm not ugly, I'm just poor' may just be a meme – but the reality behind the satire paints a terrifying vision for the future." (Atlanta, 2022)

and building a following enjoy a certain baseline of free time that allows them to participate in this digital realm (B and Manley, 2021).[117]

WHEN EVERYONE IS BEAUTIFUL, IS ANYONE?

In an era marked by the proliferation of aesthetic interventions and the growing influence of social media on beauty standards, the significance of beauty itself has undergone a profound transformation. This transformation raises questions about authenticity, identity, and class divides in the context of changing physical appearances. According to RuPaul: "you're born naked and the rest is shading and contouring," encapsulating the idea that contemporary beauty is often an illusion constructed through cosmetics, procedures, and digital enhancement (RuPaul, 2018).[118] The physical body becomes a canvas upon which one can paint and sculpt their desired image, a process is akin to a performance where individuals adopt roles and characters based on societal expectations.

The availability of aesthetic interventions and the malleability of beauty standards introduce complex dynamics related to class, wherein the capacity to purchase cosmetic interventions perpetuates socioeconomic divide. While some may have the resources to continually alter their appearance to meet evolving beauty ideals, others may not, widening the gap between those who can afford aesthetic interventions and those who cannot.

Social media has played a pivotal role in reshaping beauty ideals and disseminating them to a global audience; a platform for self-expression and self-comparison. The constant exposure to carefully curated images and videos can create unrealistic beauty expectations and exacerbate insecurities (Baird-Murray, 2021).[119]Beauty's significance exists as an illusion, shaped by cosmetics and digital enhancements.

AESTHETICS=REALITY

The realm of aesthetics and presentation transcends visual media and Onlife when examining the influence of aesthetic capitol for individuals use it to manipulate perceptions and influence others,[120] exemplified through individuals like Anna Delvey, Diamond Doris, and historical figures detailed in "American Eccentrics" by Carl Sifakis.

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[117] The influencer culture's obsession with beauty ideals has a racial dimension as well. Influencers often experiment with their appearance, adopting features historically associated with different racial backgrounds. The ability to shift and shimmer, to change one's appearance seemingly at will, is a reflection of beauty fluidity. However, this fluidity raises questions about who can adopt certain characteristics without facing stigma, making it both a class and race issue (B and Manley, 2021).

[118] Recognizing this illusion, as RuPaul suggests, grants individuals agency in shaping their characters and navigating life. It allows them to step outside themselves, viewing their lives from an external perspective and potentially altering their trajectory (RuPaul, 2018).

[119] Although social media has spurred changes in beauty norms and body positivity movements have made strides in promoting self-acceptance, these shifts have not permeated every sector of society (Baird-Murray, 2021). Some continue to seek procedures to eradicate perceived flaws, even when those flaws are natural and normal. Public figures like Jameela Jamil have denounced body shaming as deeply unfeminist and have called for collective action against it (Baird-Murray, 2021).

[120] According to Talis Adler: "being sexy is a political bargaining chip, and one that women have only managed to Take Back Control of in the past 40 or so years, and we still don't own it completely" (Adler, 2023)

Diamond Doris, as portrayed in her memoir *Diamond Doris*, masterfully crafted an illusion of wealth and glamour, despite facing systemic racism and chronic financial constraints. She managed to con jewellery shops across the world into believing she was a wealthy socialite, her inspiration for this deception coming from women's magazines like Town & Country and Harper's Bazaar, which she read as a child and absorbed as visual lifestyle. In her own words, Doris Payne explained, "I didn't feel any less than any of the young women in the magazines[...] How was I supposed to know as a child that the world imposed a difference between some women and others?" (Payne, 2019). This reflects the power of media in shaping aspirations and the effort to mimic the appearance of privilege and affluence.

Carl Sifakis's *American Eccentrics* introduces further historical figures who used deception and aesthetics, and even with parlance into traditional documentation to manipulate perceptions and achieve tangible social mobility. James Harden-Hicke laid claim to an uninhabited island and asserted kingship, adorned with documented, albeit dubious, titles. James Leo Connelly gate-crashed and became a fixture in high society without receiving invitations. Ferdinand Waldo Demara Jr forged documentation of imaginary accomplishments, constructing an entire life from deception. Emperor Joshua Norton declared himself Emperor of the United States, garnering widespread acceptance and support in San Francisco, which highlights the power of self-proclaimed titles and deceptive appearances. (Sifakis, 1986)

In contemporary times, the concept of influencers further exemplifies the ability to create personas that may not align with reality;[121] akin to cosplaying as someone famous,[122] meticulously crafted online identities and narratives can at times act as precursor substantial followings. Anna Delvey and the “Tinder Swindler” come to mind.

The ability to manipulate aesthetics and presentation for duplicitous ends underscores the profound influence of appearance in shaping perceptions and opportunities. Whether in historical narratives, contemporary influencers, or personal endeavours, individuals often navigate a delicate dance between authenticity and deception, revealing the intricate interplay between aesthetics and the human desire for transformation and reinvention.

WHO “OWNS” BEAUTY AND IMAGE?

As we delve deeper into the intricate relationship between the human body and the documentation of its various aspects, the question of ownership becomes paramount. The age-old philosophical inquiry, "Who am I?" resonates within this context of the vast landscape of personal identity, self-conception, and societal perceptions. In the world of fashion and photography, this inquiry takes on a digital twist, where the dialectics of uniqueness and conformity merge with the malleability of the digital realm, giving birth to the pervasive phenomenon of "airbrushing" (Floridi, 2016a).[123]

Exploration of ownership extends beyond the realm of aesthetics and photography to the essence of genetic makeup, as discussed previously in the context of DNA ownership. However, the question of ownership

[121] The “image one projects is not actually them […] the clothes we wear are not the person we are” (Adler, 2023)

[122] The allure of wealth, privilege, and influence can drive individuals to manipulate perceptions and create elaborate facades. "Fake it till you make it."

[123] The act of digitally retouching photographs to conform to unrealistic and misleading standards has profound consequences, particularly on the expectations of consumers, especially impressionable teenagers (Floridi, 2016a). The ethical implications of this practice have led to ongoing debates about the need for legal restrictions and the potential effectiveness of warning labels and disclaimers.

becomes more nuanced and contemporary when we consider the issues raised by individuals like Emily Ratajkowski in her book *My Body*, her candid discussions about image ownership and agency in the digital age resonating with a broader societal dialogue, and in reconsidering the case of Henrietta Lacks and the overwhelming societal benefit to the use of her genetic materials.

USE AND MISUSE OF IMAGE

In the digital age, the question of ownership becomes increasingly complex, especially when it pertains to images and likenesses of the human body. Emily Ratajkowski, a prominent figure in the fashion and modelling industry, brought this issue to the forefront in her book, *My Body*. She detailed her struggles with the control and ownership of her own image, revealing how it was exploited and commodified by various entities. Models like Ratajkowski are frequently confronted with the blurred lines of image ownership as contracts with agencies, brands, and photographers may grant them limited control over their own likeness. Beyond models, celebrities and individuals who become spokespeople for brands also face challenges related to image ownership with likeness often linked to products they endorse, and contracts can stipulate how, when, and where their images can be used.

Celebrities and even members of royalty have saleable likenesses that generate considerable revenue, with images often used on merchandise, in endorsements, and in various forms of media. In some cases, estates and individuals have maintained a tight grip on these likenesses, while others have seen their images exploited by third parties. The legal framework surrounding image ownership is intricate, involving issues related to intellectual property, contractual agreements, and privacy rights. When not clearly defined, disputes arise, and individuals may find themselves with limited recourse.[124]

From an ethical standpoint, the commodification and manipulation of images, particularly of women's bodies, raise profound concerns. The perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards through airbrushing, retouching, and digital alteration negatively impact perceptions of beauty, leading to unrealistic expectations and contribute to issues like body image dissatisfaction, especially among impressionable young audiences.

REVENGE PORN AND OWNERSHIP OF LIKNESS

In an even more sinister consideration, the issue of revenge porn has emerged as a distressing and pervasive problem. Revenge porn involves the non-consensual distribution of explicit or intimate images or videos, typically with the intent to harm or embarrass the featured party. This malicious act often causes severe emotional distress, career damage, and personal trauma to the victims. In this context, questions of image ownership become highly contentious as the individuals whose intimate images are shared without consent unquestionably own the rights to those images; however, the perpetrators of revenge porn exploit these images, using them to inflict harm on the victims. This raises a profound ethical dilemma: should individuals who never consented to the distribution of these images have any ownership rights over them? Legally,[125] different jurisdictions have varying regulations regarding revenge porn, complicating the matter

[124] In the argument that celebrities signed on for the fame and were aware of what that would entail, it should then be considered that in the age of internet virality, fame has potential to come suddenly and unexpectedly and without consent. Royalty was born to the public domain and never consented to the notoriety. How famous is famous enough to justify losses of privacy and control over one's own likeness?

[125] For more information on the current failings of the legal system in this arena, but in a slightly less depressing format, refer to John Oliver's segment on Online Harassment for *Last Week Tonight* (Oliver, 2015)

further. Some regions have introduced specific legislation to address the issue, classifying it as a criminal offense, aiming to protect victims by penalizing those who share explicit content without consent. However, enforcing such laws can be challenging, particularly when perpetrators operate anonymously on the internet.[126]

The issue of revenge porn exemplifies the intricate interplay between image ownership, consent, privacy, and the digital age. While individuals unquestionably own the rights to their own explicit images, the malicious distribution of these images by others poses profound legal and ethical questions. Striking a balance between protecting the rights of victims and upholding freedom of expression in different jurisdictions remains a formidable challenge and proactive measures, education about consent and digital security, and perpetrators accountability demand address.

AI AND OWNERSHIP OF IMAGE

Artificial intelligence (AI) and the creation of false imaging and "deep-fakes" mean that non-consensual image creation and sharing need not even rely on reality-- AI algorithms can generate lifelike images of entirely fictional individuals or combine elements from various sources to create entirely new, yet convincing, faces. Videos can be generated within seconds; trailers for films that don't exist, complete with recognizable characters and actors. This has opened a new frontier in image ownership and copyright, as these AI-generated images often lack a clear origin.

FURTHERING THIS RECORD

The discussions within this paper uncover intriguing avenues for future research and exploration across various domains, including technology, society, ethics, and personal development.

1. Ethics of Genetic Testing and Gene Editing: As the accessibility and affordability of genetic testing and gene-editing technologies increase, ethical questions become more pertinent. Future studies could delve into the ethical dilemmas surrounding these technologies, exploring issues like consent, privacy, and the potential for genetic discrimination. Additionally, examining the societal impact of designer babies and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) would be valuable.

2. Transparency in Family Records: The contrasting experiences of Aaron and Caty regarding transparency in familial records provide a compelling area of study with potential research exploring how transparency, or the lack thereof, in family records impacts individuals' sense of identity, belonging, and well-being. This could involve interviewing adoptees from varying experiences and situations, donor or surrogate conceived individuals, and their families to gain deeper insights.

3. Impact of Technology on Personal Identity: The role of technology in shaping personal identity is a rich field for exploration. Further investigation into the psychological effects of social media, virtual reality, and online avatars on self-identity and self-esteem could yield valuable insights.

4. Documenting Cultural Heritage: Understanding the importance of documenting and preserving cultural heritage is crucial. Future research could explore innovative methods for preserving cultural practices,

[126] One of the most distressing aspects of revenge porn is its shareability. Once explicit content is posted online, it can quickly spread across platforms, making it nearly impossible to fully erase. Even if the original source is removed or taken down, the content may have been copied and reuploaded countless times.

rituals, and languages in a rapidly changing world, involving the use of digital archives, immersive technologies, or community-driven initiatives. A further exploration of appropriation within the context of globalisation could additionally be considered.

5. Mental Health in the Digital Age: The prevalence of mental health issues, especially among the younger generation, in the digital age remains a pressing concern, and future research with focus on identifying effective strategies for promoting mental well-being, such as digital detox practices, online support communities, or AI-driven mental health interventions has beneficial potential.

6. Body Modification and Self-Expression: The future of body modification as a form of self-expression is an area ripe for exploration. Research could investigate emerging trends in body modification, their cultural significance, and the motivations behind individuals seeking these modifications.

7. Human-AI Collaboration: As AI systems become increasingly integrated into our lives, understanding the dynamics of human-AI collaboration is essential. Future studies might explore how AI can enhance human creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making in various domains, from art and science to healthcare and education.

8. Medical Micropigmentation and Psychological Well-being: El Truchan's work in medical micropigmentation highlights the potential for aesthetic interventions to positively impact psychological well-being. Further research could explore the psychological effects of such procedures on individuals who have experienced medical conditions, trauma, or disfigurement. This could be further integrated into research on wider varieties of gender affirmation procedures with potential to expand possibilities and availability of interventions within that context.

9. Genealogy and Ethics: The ethical considerations in genealogical research, particularly related to consent, privacy, and the responsibilities of genealogists, warrant closer examination where future studies could investigate how to navigate these ethical challenges in genealogical practice.

10. Online Communities and Identity: The role of online communities in shaping identity, such as Caty's Club Thumb Society. Research could explore how niche online groups influence individuals' self-perception, provide support, and foster a sense of belonging.

These future ideas for exploration underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the topics discussed in this dissertation, from the ethical implications of emerging technologies to the profound impact of transparent family records on personal identity, each avenue offers the potential for valuable insights that can shape our understanding of society, technology, and human experience in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation embarks on a multifaceted exploration of the interplay between records, technology, identity, and society. By engaging in a series of insightful interviews and discussions, it aimed to shed light on the intricate ways in which records, whether genetic, digital, familial, or societal, impact individuals' lives and identities. Navigating an era of rapid technological advancement and evolving societal norms, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly vital.

Through interviews with individuals like Caty Brown and Aaron VanHorn, the importance of document record on sense of identity was explored. The transparency, or lack thereof, in familial records played a central role in shaping these individuals' perceptions of self and family, an exploration highlighting the

ethical imperative of open discussions about genetic heritage, as well as the potential for technology to reveal previously hidden truths. These interviews are further underscored in an investigation of lineage and an examination of how records continually affect experience. By delving into the experiences of Deborah Hershey, who navigates familial records and genealogy, the study illuminates the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the ethical considerations surrounding genealogical research. Familial records, whether meticulously documented or shrouded in secrecy, are shown to profoundly influence one's understanding of identity, heritage, and belonging.

Technology, particularly social media and AI-driven systems, emerges as a potent force in shaping personal identity, emphasising the impact of digital avatars, online personas, and curated profiles on individuals' self-concept. The notion of a digital doppelgänger and the "quantified self" highlight the intricate relationship between technology and self-perception, offering intriguing insights into the intersection of the virtual and physical worlds.

The dissertation ventures into the realm of aesthetic interventions, such as medical micropigmentation, and their capacity to restore confidence and psychological well-being. El Truchan's expertise in this field highlights the transformative potential of such procedures for individuals who have experienced medical conditions or trauma, with discussion emphasising the therapeutic aspects of body modification as a means of restoring a positive self-image.

Suggesting future directions for exploration, recognising the burgeoning ethical questions surrounding gene editing, the importance of transparent familial records, and the need for research on technology's influence on mental health, this work acknowledges the evolving landscape of body modification, the significance of preserving cultural heritage, and the dynamics of human-AI collaboration. This dissertation achieved its aims by unveiling the intricate interplay between records, technology, identity, and society, demonstrating that records are not mere repositories of information but powerful agents that mould understanding of self and heritage. The interviews conducted with individuals from diverse backgrounds illuminated the myriad ways in which records, whether genetic, digital, familial, or medical, exert a profound influence on personal identity and well-being.

As we look toward the future, this study underscores the ethical responsibilities tied to records, the transformative potential of technology, and the enduring significance of preserving cultural heritage. Records are not passive artifacts but active participants in the narratives of our lives. Consequently, recognizing their impact and ensuring ethical and transparent handling of records becomes imperative in an ever-evolving technological landscape.

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EXTERNAL GUIDES & REFERENCES FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

TRANS MODIFICATION AND THE NECESSITY OF GENDER AFFIRMING CARE

GENDER INTELLIGENCE

External Resource List and References

Gender Intelligence offers resources for young transpeople, families, carers, friends and loved ones. Their resources include key information about exploring gender, accessing support, finding community, transition, gender expression and style guides, mental health, sports groups, legal rights, and trans joy. Find online at https://genderedintelligence.co.uk/

Image Source: Gender Intelligence logo. https://genderedintelligence.co.uk/



WHAT'S THE T?

Book/ Reference Source by Juno Dawson

A modern Guide to the transgender experience. This book is a reference guide, for all things trans and non-binary, it has all you need to know to get started.

Image Source: Dawson, J. What's the T? Book Cover



JAMMIDODGER

Youtuber

Dr Jamie Anthony Lotun-Raines, PhD is an English YouTuber, LGBT advocate, and trans man. His videos include commentary on gender identity and other LGBTQ+ issues as well as general lifestyle topics.

He often debunks misinformation around transitioning and queer topics through memes and doctoral level research experience.

Image Source: Raines, J. YouTube Profile Image, 2023.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFLUENCERS



LUXERIA

Youtuber and Twitch Streamer

Luxeria is a heavily tattooed transwoman who streams on twitch and produces commentary content on Plastic Surgery, Reality TV, Beauty, Science, and Cosmetics History. She documented her experiences pursuing, receiving, and recovering from Facial Feminization Surgery and her most popular videos series are reactions to "The Swan" (air date: 2004) and "Bridalplasty," (air date: 2010), cosmetic surgery-based reality shows where contestants compete for prizes of invasive surgery. She additionally has

series on America's Next Top Model, examining issues of changing beauty standards during the reality show's decades long run.

Image Source: Celes, L. Luxeria Facebook Profile Image, 2023

DOCTOR YOUN

Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Podcast



Known as America's Holistic Plastic Surgeon, Dr Anthony Youn, M.D. F.A.C.S is a board-certified plastic surgeon who aims to teach a holistic approach to beauty.

He is the author of the best-selling books "The Age Fix: A Leading Plastic Surgeon Reveals How to Really Look Ten Years Younger," "In Stitches: A Memoir," and "Playing God: The Evolution of a Modern Surgeon."

Dr Youn also hosts The Holistic Plastic Surgery Show podcast.

Image Source: Youn, A. YouTube Profile Image, 2023

PLASTIC SURGEON INFLUENCERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA STARS

External Reference List

Specialist Practice Excellence has compiled a reference list of the most successful cosmetic surgeons on various social media platforms, primarily Instagram. Their list includes the credentials and locations of the doctors profiled and can be found on the Specialist Practice Excellence Website

Image Source: Specialist Practice Excellence Logo. https://specialistpracticeexcellence.com.au/

PRACTICAL INFORMATION IN PURSUIT OF ALTERATION

PERFECT DEFINITION

Business



If you should want to book a consultation for a treatment of your own: Perfect Definition offers Microblading, Permanent Makeup, Medical Tattooing & Aesthetics by El Truchan C.P.C.P.

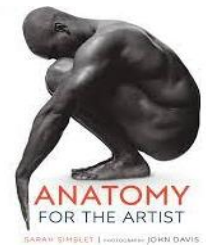
Business information can be found at https://www.perfectdefinition.co.uk/

El Truchan's interview transcript can be found in Appendix II

Image Source: http://perfectdefinition.co.uk

A HISTORY OF HUMAN BEAUTY

The history of beauty is a rich and complex tapestry that has been woven throughout the ages. From ancient civilizations to the modern era, humans have celebrated the beauty of the human form in countless ways. However, it is important to recognize that the concept of beauty is not static, but rather evolves and changes over time. Beauty ideals are often influenced by cultural trends and societal expectations, and can vary greatly from one era to the next. In this section of the guide, we will explore the history of beauty and how it has shaped our perceptions of the human form, while acknowledging the fluidity of these ideals and the influence of trends.

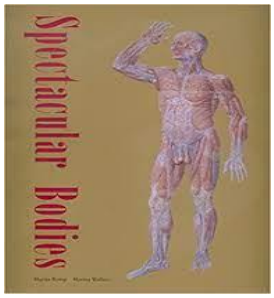


ANATOMY FOR THE ARTIST

Book by Sarah Simblet

A celebration of the inherent beauty of the human form, in all its iterations, as represented for art.

Image Source: Simblet, S. Book Cover. 2001

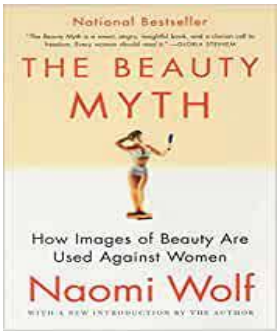


SPECTACULAR BODIES

Book by Martin Kemp

Investigating the wonders of the human body and face, showcasing works of art over five centuries.

Image Source: Kemp, M. Book Cover. 2000



THE BEAUTY MYTH: HOW IMAGES OF BEAUTY ARE USED AGAINST WOMEN

Book by Naomi Wolf

The myth of female beauty challenges every woman in everyday life. In this book, Wolf exposes the tyranny of the myth and its oppressive function today. If you should be questioning your motivations behind pursuit of any cosmetic intervention, this is a good reference for unpacking the influences of advertising and culture to ensure that any changes you're making you're doing because they are what actually suit you best, not a reaction to contemporary culture.

Image Source: Wolf, N. Book Cover. 1990

A HISTORY OF ALTERATIONS

The history of body modification dates back thousands of years, with evidence of tattooing and other forms of body art found in ancient cultures across the globe. To understand the history of body modification, it is important to first understand how tattoos work on the skin.



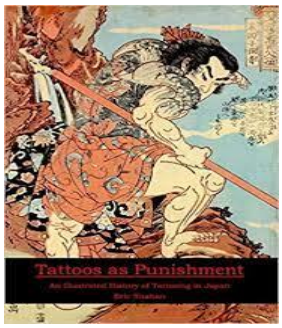
WHAT TATTOOS DO TO THE SKIN

Reference Video

An introduction to how tattoos physically stain the skin and how layers of the skin work together from the Institute of Human Anatomy

Tattoos are created by injecting ink into the dermis layer of the skin, which is the second layer of skin. As the skin heals, the ink becomes permanently embedded in the skin's cells, resulting in a lasting image or design. In this section of the guide, we will explore the history of body modification in greater depth, drawing on the work of various authors and experts in the field. From the ancient practice of scarification to the modern trend of cosmetic surgery, resources shown examine the cultural significance of body modification and its evolution over time.

Image Source: Institute of Human Anatomy. YouTube Channel Profile Photo and Logo. 2023



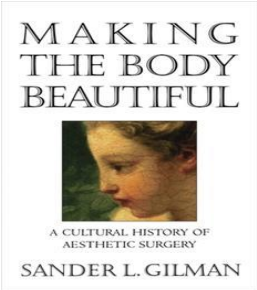
TATTOOS AS PUNISHMENT: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF TATTOOING IN JAPAN

Book by Eric Shahan

This book is a chronologically organized history of tattoo culture in Japan, a culture in which tattooed individuals still carry an enormous stigma. The history of the form in Japan dates to the Jomon Era, the stone age 14,000-300BCE and so is historically weighty and rich with fluxuations in meanings and cultural implication.

Have a read before even thinking of getting “peace” kanji tattoo

Image Source: Shahan, E. Book Cover, 2019

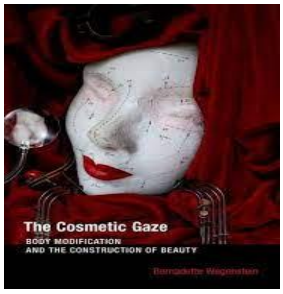


MAKING THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

Book by Sander L. Gilman

A cultural history of aesthetic surgery, touching on subjects as diverse as getting a "nose job" as a sweet-sixteen birthday present and the removal of male breasts in seventh-century Alexandria, Gilman argues that aesthetic surgery has such universal appeal because it helps people to "pass," to be seen as a member of a group with which they want to or need to identify.

Image Source: Gilman, S. Book Cover. 1999

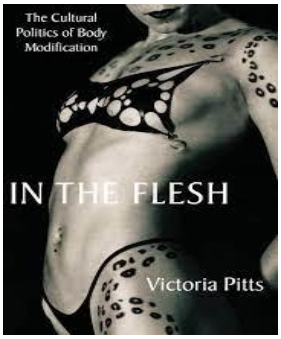


THE COSMETIC GAZE: BODY MODIFICATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BEAUTY

Book by Bernadette Wegenstein

An exploration of the history of body modification from the 18th century through current media representations. This book explores themes of choice, personal freedom, and identity in late capitalism and amongst contemporary "norms"

Image Source: Wegenstein, B. Book Cover. 2012

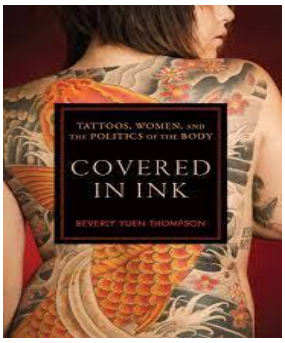


IN THE FLESH

Book by Victoria Pitts

Based on years of interviews with body modifiers throughout the United States, this book provides a comprehensive look at the phenomenon of body modification: rises in body piercings, the emergence of neo-tribal practices like scarification and flesh hanging, and the invention of Hi-Tech forms of body art like subdermal implants. Pitts explorers the connections between body modification and contemporary struggles over sex and gender and widespread attitudes about identity and the body.

Image Source: Pitts, V. Book Cover. 2003

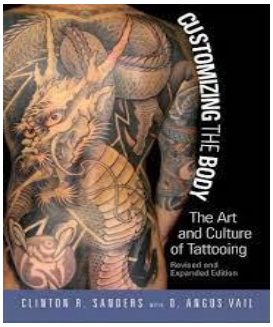


COVERED IN INK: TATTOOS, WOMEN, AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

Book by Beverly Yuen Thompson

This book provides insight into increasingly visible subculture of tattooed women. Despite increases in prevalence of tattoos across all genders, on average women get tattoos that are more "gender appropriate"-- cute, small, and easily hidden. But some collect larger scale tattoos on publicly visible skin, of imagery not considered feminine.

Image Source: Thompson, Y. Book Cover. 2015



CUSTOMIZING THE BODY: THE ART AND CULTURE OF TATTOOING

Book by Clinton R. Sanders

An ethnographic exploration of tattooing and the art World surrounding it. This book covers the history, anthropology, and sociology of body modification practices, the occupational experience of tattoo artists, the social consequences of becoming tattooed, and the perspectives of tattooing becoming a more accepted art form.

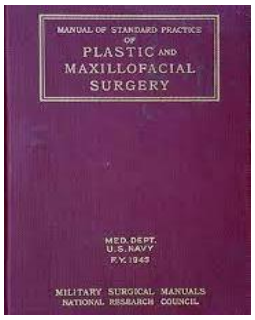
Image Source: Sanders, C. Book Cover. 1989

TATTOOS AND BODY MODIFICATIONS IN ANTIQUITY

Conference proceedings- Available online

Zurich Studies in Archaeology
Vol. 9_2013

Proceedings of the sessions at the EAA annual meetings in The Hague and Oslo, 2010/11.
An exploration of the ancient history of body modification and tattooing. Topics include:
Interpreting the tattoos on a 700-year-old mummy from South America
Tattoos from Mummies of the Pazyryk Culture
The Tattoo System in the Ancient Iranian World
Roman Cosmetics Revisited: Facial Modification and Identity
Image Source: Logo for the Zurich Studies in Archaeology. 2011



MANUAL OF STANDARD PRACTICE OF PLASTIC AND MAXILLOFACIAL SURGERY

Book

Published in 1942, this military issue surgical manual demonstrates early methods of reconstructive surgery, and, although the techniques outlined are obsolete now, the book offers a look at how far the industry has come and shifts in priority and target demographic for facial surgery.

Image Source: Book Cover. 1942

BODY SCULPTORS: THE HISTORY OF PLASTIC SURGERY

Documentary Film. Available via VHS from the Wellcome Library, London

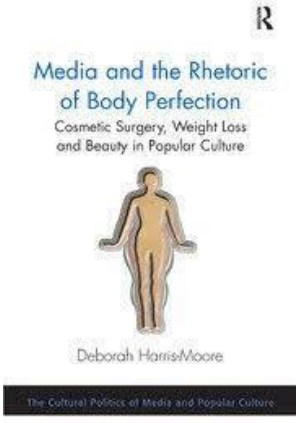
wellcome collection

2003 film. An examination of cosmetic surgery includes its roots in ancient India, and follows a patient undergoing a procedure. Also: early experiments in plastic surgery. The VHS copy contains commercial advertisements, many for cosmetic interventions, and is an interesting time capsule.

Image Source: Wellcome Collection Logo. http://wellcomecollection.org

MEDIA AND THE RHETORIC OF BODY PERFECTION

Book by Deborah Harris-Moore



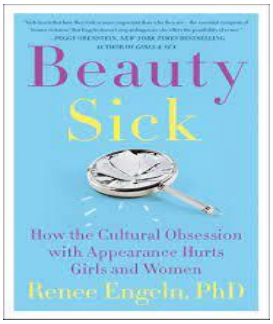
This book provides a critical examination of the discourses of physical perfection that are pervasive in Western societies. The author sheds new light on the societal forces that fuel body anxieties and extreme weight loss and beautification methods. The text includes interviews with cosmetic surgery patients and offers fresh analyses of various texts from popular culture, including internationally-screened reality-television shows such as The Biggest Loser, Extreme Makeover, and The Swan, as well as entertainment programs and documentaries. Through these analyses, the book explores how Western media capitalize on body anxiety by presenting physical perfection as a moral imperative, while advertising quick and effective transformation

methods to erase physical imperfections. In addition, the book pays attention to contemporary lines of resistance to standards of thinness and attempts to redefine conceptions of beauty.

This resource would be useful for a scholarly approach to body modification, cosmetic surgery, and sociology of the body

Image Source: Harris-Moore, D. Book Cover. 2013

INVESTIGATIONS ON DYSMORPHIA



BEAUTY SICK: HOW THE CULTURAL OBSESSION WITH APPPEARANCE HURTS GIRLS AND WOMEN

Book by Renee Engeln, PhD

This book offers an examination of contemporary culture, particularly the beauty ideal as it is represented in the media toward girls and women; it offers motivation and workable solutions for embracing of the whole self.

Image Source: Engeln, R. Book Cover. 2017

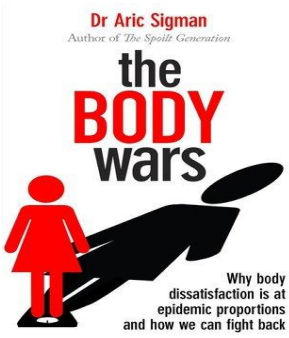
CATALYST- INVESTIGATING BODY DYSMORPHIA

Documentary

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a serious mental illness where you obsess over a physical flaw that others can't see. Until recently, BDD treatments were rarely studied, but cognitive neuropsychologist Professor Susan Rossell and her team at Swinburne University of Technology have been working on new tools. They are using eye-tracking technology to try and understand if people with BDD look at faces and bodies differently to the way most of us do.

In the pursuit of extensive physical alterations, it is important to examine motivations regularly and check in with a therapist. It is necessary to be aware of the signs, and there is no shame in asking for help.

Image Source: ABC News Logo. http://abc.net.au



THE BODY WARS

Book By Dr Aric Sigman

An examination of cultural trends of body dissatisfaction and dysmorphia. A useful resource during examination of reasoning for modification and cosmetic alteration.

Image Source: Sigman, A. Book Cover.2014

PSCHOLOGICAL AND PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF APPLICANTS FOR FACIAL COSMETIC SURGERY

Journal Article, Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (2020)
DOI 10.1007/s00266-020-01682-6



The aim of this study was to investigate the psychological and personality characteristics of the applicants for facial cosmetic surgery.

The results showed that 45.2% of the participants had abnormal health status. The mean score of the participants on the openness subscale was insignificantly lower than that of the general population ($p > 0.05$). On the other hand, the mean scores of the participants on the conscientiousness and agreeableness subscales were significantly lower ($p < 0.001$). Finally, the mean score of the samples on the extroversion subscale was significantly higher than that of the general population ($p < 0.001$).

Results of the study indicate a recommendation to address psychological characteristics of applicants for cosmetic surgery before operating.

Image Source: Cover of the Journal of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. 2023

EXPLORING THE LINKS BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION, BODY-DISSATISFACTION, AND ACCEPTANCE OF COSMETIC SURGERY IN YOUNG ITALIAN WOMEN

Journal Article, Frontiers in Psychology (2019)
DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02698

This study aimed to examine the association between positive (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and negative (isolation, self-judgment, and over-identification) components of self-compassion, and both body dissatisfaction and acceptance of cosmetic surgery among women, through the mediation of internalization and physical appearance comparison.

Self-judgment and isolation did not present a significant association with either body dissatisfaction or acceptance of cosmetic surgery. These findings confirm that psychological assessment of women who are interested in cosmetic surgery is highly recommended.

Image Source: Cover of Frontiers in Psychology Journal. 2023

PLASTIC SURGERY*: BEAUTY OR BEAST?*

Article from the American Psychological Association

The American Psychological Association investigates the mental implications of appearance alteration

"Overall, there are more questions than answers regarding psychological effects of cosmetic surgery: There are few longitudinal studies and many contradictory findings, researchers note. Many studies also contain small sample sizes and short follow-ups with patients"

Image Source: Logo for the American Psychological Association



PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF AESTHETIC AND COSMETIC SURGERY: CLINICAL AND THERAPUETIC IMPLICATIONS

Journal Article, Dermatologic Therapy (2020)
DOI 10.1111/dth.13727

Surges in cosmetic and aesthetic surgery procedures, with patients seeking various cosmetics interventions, have led to questions over the psychiatric health of the pursuers. This article calls for proper screening and evaluation of these patients in order to save money and resources.

Image Source: Cover of the Journal of Dermatologic Therapy. 2023

ARTISTS IN THE OPERATING ROOM

These artists take body modification beyond the realm of personal expression and into the world of art, using it as a tool for commentary and social critique. One artist draws inspiration from the history of surgery and medical science, creating detailed wax sculptures that explore the intersections of reconstruction, beauty, and the advancement of human ingenuity. Another artist uses permanent body modification to transform herself into a living work of art, blurring the lines between art and life. The final artist uses temporary modifications such as suspension to create stunning performances that challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of what we consider to be beautiful. These artists show us that body modification can be a powerful form of artistic expression that can challenge our perceptions of beauty, identity, and the human form.

ELEANOR CROOK

Artist



The anatomical wax artist Eleanor Crook pays tribute to the advent of the modern field of cosmetic surgery in her piece for Gordon Museum of Pathology at Guy's Hospital, London, titled "And the Band Played On". The life-size instalment exemplifies the facial injuries typical of musket shots and fuel fires, injuries resulting in permanent debilitating deformity which crippled the physical and mental well-being of the fallen. The results of early procedures yielded cruder results than current methods, but the outcome meant that a previously lost degree of normalcy could be returned to the soldiers, enough for them to move on in life and mentality.

Image Source: Crook, E. http://eleanorcrook.net

ORLAN

Artist

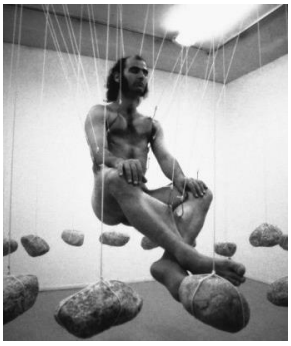


The French artist Orlan stands as one of the first prominent artists to seize the opportunity presented by the advancements of surgery and completely redesign herself beyond the realm of aesthetic and into art. From 1990 to 1995, Orlan pushed the artistic career that had been defined as "a series of rebirths and triumphs of will over technology" to a higher threshold, by undergoing permanent reconstruction of her body in an attempt to rewrite Western art (Jeffries, 2009). Although the surgeries attempted to mimic the ideals of beauty presented in classical art, Orlan insists that vanity and beauty played no major influencing role. In her words, she wanted "to be different, strong; to sculpt [her] own body to reinvent the self. […] [She] tried to use surgery not to better [herself] or become a younger version of [herself], but to work on the concept of image and surgery the other way around." (Jeffries, 2009) Even the procedures themselves reflect Orlan's goals of transcending the aesthetic and offering a critique of the conventions of cosmetic surgery; donning elaborate designer costumes, Orlan read poetry and played music while experiencing her alterations in full consciousness, broadcasting herself to the world through video. In this way, Orlan joins the Body Modification community, pursing nonconventional aesthetic through a journey and a psychological exercise of self-exploration and modification, rather than a flat presentation of the before and after.

Image Source: Orlan. http://theartstory.org

STELARC

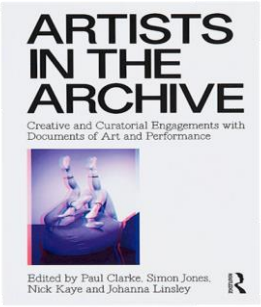
Artist



Many members of the Body Modification community view their bodies as projects, ways of investigating themselves, Body Modification, concerning itself more with the experience than outcome, encompasses performative modifications such as suspension. Artists like Stelarc use this system as an instrument for art, as shown in the image. Like those undergoing surgery in order to affect their lives and social standing, body modifiers believe that their identity can be transformed through altering their bodies and further through alteration of the body's symbolic and personal meaning.

Image Source: Stelarc. http://stelarc.org

ARTISTS IN THE ARCHIVE: CREATIVE AND CURATORIAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH DOCUMENTS OF ART AND PERFORMANCE



Book by P.H. Clarke

This book explores the agency and materiality of the archival document through a stunning collection of critical writings and original artworks. It deals directly with the body as an object of performance and is a good resource reminder that bodies are capable of beauty through learned action. There are matters of skill and labour that tend the practice of archiving, including questions about the impact that this work has on the body. In these regards, Artists in the Archive addresses the definition of the archive found in dialogues between infrastructural and institutional contexts and individual and communal artistic practices.

Image Source: Clarke, P.H. Book cover. 2018

MODIFICATION DIPICTIONS IN MEDIA

Body modification in media has come a long way from its taboo past. In popular culture, we see examples such as Popeye's iconic anchor tattoo, but also more nuanced representations in books and film. The Twilight Zone features an episode where a woman undergoes surgery to fit in with society's beauty standards, only to find that the new normal is not what it seems. The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo uses body modification as a central element of the story, with the main character sporting multiple tattoos and piercings. In reality TV, shows like The Swan and Bridalplasty have contestants undergo extreme cosmetic procedures in order to achieve their ideal appearance. These representations provide insight into the motivations and effects of body modification, and how it can be used to shape identity and societal norms.

POPEYE THE SAILOR



First Cartoon Character with visible tattoos

In 1929, Popeye emerged in the daily King Features comic strip as the first cartoon with visible modifications (tattoos) Since Popeye, pop culture has seen various cartoon characters with tattoos, a particularly boom occurring in 1980's. For a full list of tattooed toons, refer to "A Complex History of Tattooed Comic Book Characters" on Complex.com

Image Source: Segar, S. Image in the public domain

ARKANGEL



Television Series Episode

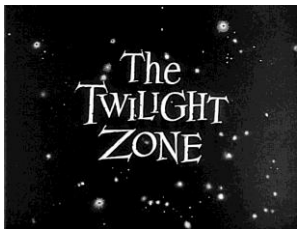
Episode of the Netflix series Black Mirror. Aired 2017

An implanted technology microchip a mother to track her daughter's location, current vision and hearing, and automatically censors distressing material.

Image Source: Black Mirror Logo. https:/Netflix.co.uk

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Television Series Episode



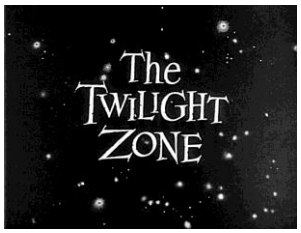
Episode of the 1960s American Television series The Twilight Zone.

A woman undergoes numerous extreme surgeries in order to become-- not beautiful-- but normal. She desires to fit the standard of her circumstances, and only after her bandages fall away after the final surgery, revealing an incredibly beautiful woman (to Western standards), and the surgery declared a failure does the audience realize the truth. The large snouts on the pig faces of the doctors and nurses who treated her, finally shown, comprise the standard for beauty in this context. The woman, though beautiful to the audience watching the episode, is considered hideous to herself and to her peers, because that typifies the nature of beauty as a societal construct in her environment. What determines beauty remains entirely subjective.

Image Source: CBS network. Series Logo. 1959.

NUMBER 12 LOOKS JUST LIKE YOU

Television Series Episode



Episode of the 1960s American Television series The Twilight Zone.

A young girl contemplates the meaning of beauty in her society, where teenagers undergo a transformation in which each person's body and face are changed to mimic a physically attractive design chosen from a small selection of numbered models. The process gives everyone a beautiful appearance, but the main character decides not to undergo the process, concluding that everyone being beautiful is the same as being ugly, and the conformity of the process strips away individual identity. Essentially, when everyone is “beautiful”, the beauty of hideousness no longer matters, only conformity to a standard.

Image Source: CBS network. Series Logo. 1959.

THE SWAN

Television Series/Reality Series



The Swan is an American reality television series broadcast by the Fox Broadcasting Company (Fox). It premiered on April 7, 2004, while its eighteenth and final episode aired on December 20, 2004.

Each episode of the series followed two self-proclaimed "ugly ducklings" who, over the course of a three-month period, experienced an extreme makeover from a team that included a personal trainer, therapist, dentist, and cosmetic surgeons. Whichever woman was deemed more attractive at the end of the three months would move forward to compete in a beauty pageant held at the end of the season. Following the pageant, whichever contestant received the most votes for the greatest transformation would be given the title "The Swan".

Image Source: Fox Broadcasting Company. Promotional Imagery. 2004

BRIDALPLASTY

Television Series/ Reality Series

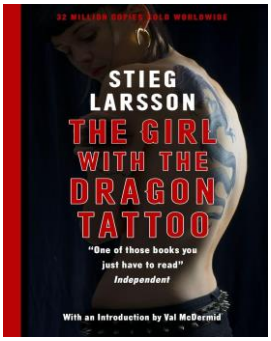


Bridalplasty followed 12 engaged or already married women competing for the wedding of their dreams and their dream plastic surgery procedure. Each woman had a plastic surgery wish list, and the winner of each week's wedding-themed challenge would win one plastic surgery procedure from her list. The winner of the overall competition received the wedding of her dreams, and had her entire wish list fulfilled. The husband-to-be did not see his fiancée until she revealed her new look on their wedding day.

Image Source: E! network promotional poster imagery. 2010

THE GIRL WITH A DRAGON TATTOO

Book by Stieg Larsson

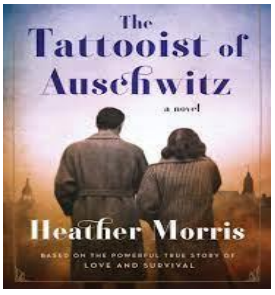


In this Swedish psychological thriller, tattoos indicate both nonconformity and the individual's assertion of power over the body. The title character, Salander's tattoos mark her immediately as an unorthodox figure and always draw the attention of others. However, though Salander's tattoos mark her as a nonconformist, they also indicate her control over her own body and her fierce self-possession.

Image Source: Larson, S. Book Cover.2005

THE TATTOOIST OF AUSCHWITZ

Book by Heather Morris



A beautiful book and a reminder of the less savoury historical impact of tattooing.

Image Source: Morris, H. Book Cover. 2017

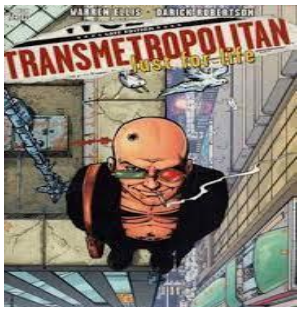
UGLIES/PRETTIES/SPECIALS

Book Series by Scott Westerfield



A YA dystopian fantasy series about a society whose children undergo intense cosmetic alteration at the time of puberty to make them physically perfect adults

Image Source: Westerfeld, S. Book cover, 2005



TRANSMETROPOLITAN

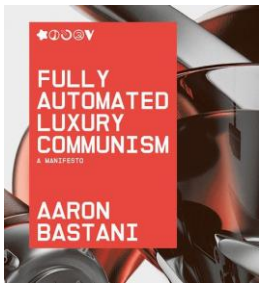
DC Comic Series by Warren Ellis

Transmetropolitan is a cyberpunk transhumanist comic book, with the first instalment exploring themes of intense body modification leading to species conversion.

Image Source: Ellis, W. DC Comics Cover. 2016

CLASSISM IN THE PURSUIT OF BEAUTY

Access to an enhanced appearance can often come at a hefty price, putting it out of reach for many who cannot afford it. However, those who are able to access these services often benefit from a halo effect - a phenomenon where individuals who are physically attractive are perceived as having other positive qualities, such as intelligence or charisma. This can lead to better job opportunities and higher salaries, perpetuating a cycle of financial success. Unfortunately, this can also reinforce classism and further marginalize those who are unable to access these resources.



FULLY AUTOMATED LUXURY COMMUNISM

Book by Aaron Bastani

This book examines contemporary and potential future advances of technology, including innovations in aesthetic medicine. It speculates that advances in cosmetic intervention may result in increases of classism as the wealthy afford greater intervention.

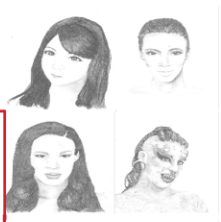
Image Source: Bastani, A. Book Cover. 2019

Physical Perfection for a Price

The Motivations behind Body Modification and the New Normal of Surgically Achieved 'Perfection'

Mary Helen Mack, BSc, BA, MA

Surgery both indicates and affects the psychology of patients who pursue alteration through either traditional or non-normative means. Although a relatively new field, cosmetic surgery continues to advance, growing from the rudimentary surgical solutions of war surgeons to the delicate contemporary procedures peeling away years from an aging face. So, what does it mean to be normal in the wake of the rapidly expanding availability of surgical alteration? What does it mean to be beautiful?



The Primary Motivation of Cosmetic Surgery: Aesthetics

The Primary Motivations of Body Modification:
1. Aesthetics
2. Shock Value
3. Spirituality
4. Sexual Enhancement

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)

First introduced officially in the 1987 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Involves preoccupation with appearance beyond the norm, often resulting in the fixation interfering with other aspects of the individual's life

Overall, the want for cosmetic surgery remains normal, but in the case of BDD and the unyielding pursuit of unattainable perfection, surgery indicates a tremendous underlying issue of self-esteem. When the patient cannot achieve their personal goals of identity psychologically, the physical changes become meaningless.



While surgery itself becomes increasingly established worldwide, types of surgery retain some regional specialization: Iran leads the world in rhinoplasty, eyelid surgery throughout Asia, and in the United States (as well as most Western European countries), breast augmentation and liposuction remain the top invasive procedures.

The Underlying Motivation of Alteration: Happiness

In 2014

over 14 million cosmetic surgery procedures

were performed in the United States of America

A 13% increase from 2011 and up more than 200% from 2000.

$13 billion* per year industry

extends beyond the United States

In 2013, the US accounted for only 12.5% of surgeries performed

*Americans spend 13 billion US dollars annually on cosmetic surgery procedures, including invasive procedures and non-surgical injections, like Botox. This figure is not inclusive of other modifications like cosmetics, hair dyes, or weight loss products. The "2011-2012 revenue of the United States weight loss industry, which includes drugs, surgeries, and weight loss books, was approximately twenty billion dollars." (Harris-Moore, 2014, p. 13)

A 2014 survey by MSN concluded that 62% of women would be congratulatory, rather than judgmental or critical, toward a friend admitting to surgery.

Another survey from American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, in 2014 "found that 52% of people are considering aesthetic treatments, up from 30%" in 2013 (Stein, 2015, p. 43).

A 2005 European study published in Grazia magazine found that:

the majority of modern women expect to have cosmetic surgery in their lifetime. Additionally, according to the study:

25% of teenage boys expect to have surgery performed

and

40% of teenage girls are already deliberating on the procedures they seek

When World War I ended, the field of cosmetic surgery continued to gain momentum as a means of achieving normalcy and overcoming the "psychologically traumatizing" detriments inherent in appearance

Cosmetic surgery became:
"Pschology with a scalpel"

Declining stigmas and increased availability and affordability, individuals from all social classes possess the ability to alter themselves to their own personal specifications.

Cosmetic surgery now possesses such ubiquity that it comprises an ordinary part of self- maintenance

Success of surgery relies upon personal satifaction

if a person remains uncomfortable with who they are, then the pursuit is pointless

Alterations conducted for an individual require pure self-motivation and cannot rely on the changing societal constructs of beauty in order to be truly successful and beneficial. This assertion echoes from the study conducted by Ed Diener, which concluded that self-perception influenced net increases in well-being and personal satisfaction to the greatest extent. Cosmetic surgery achieved success only when aiding individuals to feel more attractive to themselves, when external influencers intervened or unrealistically high expectations of what the surgery will accomplish presented themselves, individuals concluded their alterations less content and psychologically healthy than prior to surgery.

No matter one's class standing, surgical procedures and weight loss methods are often advertised in terms of doing it for yourself as an individual right and reward, and as a means of power and social mobility. In a society that sets standards for normalcy, power, beauty, and other ideals, however, doing anything truly for yourself or even by yourself is impossible." (Harris-Moore, 2014, p. 27)

Beauty is a Social Construct

(Changing ever more rapidly in the Internet Age)

With the advent of readily available cosmetic surgery, anyone can try to achieve their individual notion of beauty as part of a quest to increase psychological well-being. But, beauty exists as a social construct and thus cannot be defined truly by strict standard such as Western society has attempted through media depictions. With this consideration, the quest toward beauty perfection without pure self-motivation diminishes, and the pursuit could become a hollow reflection of societal standards.

An individual risks becoming a caricature of social trends or cultural values

In a 2005 study, psychologist David Sarwer, PhD, director of the Education, Weight and Eating Disorders Program at the University of Pennsylvania, and associate professor of psychology at the Center for Human Appearance at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, found that:

a year after receiving cosmetic surgery, 87 % of patients reported satisfaction

including improvements in their overall body image and the body feature altered. They also experienced less negative body image emotions in social situations. (Ditzmann, 2005, p. 30)



The study of Physical Attractiveness and Selective Well-Being concluded that objective measures of attractiveness do not exhibit a significant correlation to success, but rather, self-perception remains the dominant factor in measurements of self-esteem and resulting success. (Cascio, 2014).

Statistics from the American Psychological Association estimate

7-12%

of patients pursuing cosmetic surgery suffer from BDD in some form

ucc
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

APPENDIX I: ORIGINAL DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

INTRODUCTION OF PREMISE

The human body has been documented in various forms throughout history, ranging from medical illustrations and anatomical drawings to photographs and digital images. In recent years, the human body has increasingly become the subject of cultural and artistic representation, with aesthetic surgeries, body modifications, and body art becoming more prevalent.

Despite the growing interest in the human body as a form of documentation, there has been little research conducted on this topic from a Library and Information Science (LIS) perspective. This proposed research aims to fill this gap by investigating the human body as a document, with consideration to document theory, the ship of Theseus thought experiment, aesthetics, modification, cultural heritage, and representation in media. From a LIS perspective, this research is relevant because it addresses the theme of documentality, which is a key concept in LIS theory. The human body as a form of documentation raises important questions about the nature of documents, their creation, and their social and cultural significance. This research will contribute to the development of LIS theory by exploring the human body as a document and its implications for the field.

The proposed research is necessary and useful because it will contribute to the understanding of the ways in which the human body is documented and represented in various forms. This research will provide insights into the cultural and historical significance of the human body as a document, as well as the ethical and social implications of documenting the human body. In addition, the proposed research will have practical implications for LIS professionals who work with medical and scientific documents, as well as those who work with cultural heritage and archival materials.

This thesis proposal aims to investigate the human body as a document, considering its representation, modification, cultural heritage, and aesthetics. The research will use interdisciplinary approaches to analyze the ethical and cultural dimensions of cosmetic modification and aesthetic surgeries, and to examine the representation and commodification of the human body through social media and exhibitions.

AIMS, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to explore the concept of the human body as a document, investigating how it can be interpreted, represented, and commodified in various contexts.

OBJECTIVES:

Analyze the theories and concepts related to document theory, aesthetics, modification, cultural heritage, and representation in media, and their implications for the human body as document.

Examine concepts of documentality/ document theory and how the human form fits within this understanding.

Investigate the ethical and cultural dimensions of cosmetic modification and aesthetic surgeries.

Examine the historical and contemporary representation of the human body in exhibitions, such as "Body Worlds," and the cultural significance and heritage associated with it.

Investigate the body as a record, potentially questioning the possession of image and user rights and authorization of use of likeness, a currently contentious topic in advertising and adult industries.

Develop a critical understanding of the commodification of images of the human body, especially through social media.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

How can the human body be understood as a document?

How can the human body be conceptualized as a document within the field of LIS?

In what ways can the human body be "read" or interpreted within the context of LIS? (History of tattoo and cultural heritage? DNA and project human genome? Evolution and the fossil record?)

What interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies can be applied to enhance our understanding of the human body as a document?

What are the ethical and cultural implications of cosmetic modification and aesthetic surgeries?

How are images of the human body commodified in contemporary media, and what are the consequences of this?

What is the cultural significance and heritage associated with the representation of the human body in exhibitions?

ADDITIONAL IDEAS TO EXPLORE

If the human body is a document, is modification a form of editing?

Can the ship of Theseus thought experiment be applied to the human body? In consideration of aging and cell turnover, are bodies the same when they are modified or when anti-aging procedures are undergone? Children are not the same as teens or adults or the elderly—at what point in aging is the document of the body determined? Cells are constantly turned over and so, even at a cellular level, the body, like the ship, may not be considered the same.

With regard to advances in surgical technique and advances in medicine, how far can the editing of form go? Embryos can be screened before the gestational period and the concept of editing genes of potential fetuses has been a matter of scientific speculation for years: Designer babies.

Questions regarding consent of alteration-- for example: cosmetic surgery conducted on minors, reconstructions after accidents (seeking of alteration not otherwise sought), tattoos on prisoners.

At what point is information on cosmetic alteration and disclosure necessary for public disclosure? The rise of influencer culture and the “Instagram face” has led to higher rates of dysmorphia and bodily dissatisfaction among the public, so at what point (if any) do celebrities/public figures have an obligation to disclose their own aesthetic alterations.

Some modifications are functional- like implantation of magnets or microchips- and thus can objectively enhance information accessibility. Beyond the body as record in personal or heritage means, it can become a digital information repository.

SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

The scope of this thesis is to investigate the human body as a document, with a focus on its aesthetic, cultural, and ethical dimensions. The study will consider living individuals who undergo modifications or aesthetic surgeries and analyse the representation and commodification of the human body through social media. The research will also examine the historic prevalence of human zoos and the display of bodies in art exhibitions, particularly Body Worlds. The study will be limited to the context of Western culture and its media representation of the human body.

We will define Body Modification as any intentional alteration made to the body's appearance, often for the purpose of expressing individuality, cultural identity, or personal aesthetics. This can include piercings, tattoos, scarification, and other forms of body art.

Aesthetic Modification can be defined as any intentional alteration made to the body's appearance for the purpose of enhancing or changing its visual appeal, often through cosmetic surgery or other procedures. This can include breast augmentation, rhinoplasty, and other forms of surgical intervention.

Body Modification and Aesthetic Modification are broad terms primarily distinguished from one another in that Body Modification can extend beyond aesthetic value. Some Body Modifications are functional, serving a purpose beyond the visual.

Cosmetic surgery is a term used to describe any medical procedure that is performed with the primary goal of enhancing the physical appearance of a patient. This can include both reconstructive procedures, which are intended to restore the appearance of the body after injury or illness, as well as elective procedures performed for aesthetic reasons.

Anti-aging refers to any procedures or treatments that are designed to slow down or reverse the physical signs of aging. This can include cosmetic procedures such as facelifts, Botox injections, and other interventions.

In distinguishing between normative and non-normative motivations for modification: Normative motivations refer to those that are driven by societal expectations or cultural norms, such as the desire to conform to a certain standard of beauty. These alterations tend to bring the physical body more toward a “natural” “ideal”. Non-normative motivations are driven by individual desires and expressions of identity and tend to veer away from societal standards or create an overtly “unnatural” aesthetic. As an example, tattoos, while gaining in popularity, can be considered non-normative in these definitions as tattoos do not occur naturally/organically on the human body and tend to fall outside the most mainstream (Western) beauty targets.

LIMITATIONS

While the field of gender affirmation and transgender care, particularly in the physical transition (e.g., facial feminization/masculinization surgery, breast augmentation, etc.), would fall under the definitions of aesthetic alteration, this thesis will not be a full exploration of these topics, though will ideally touch upon them.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis will draw on interdisciplinary fields, including Library and Information Science, Cultural Studies, and Art History. The research will analyze key theoretical concepts related to document theory, aesthetics, modification, cultural heritage, and representation in media.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

This paper will begin with an extensive review of existing literature in the field of LIS, including interdisciplinary sources, to establish a theoretical framework and gain insight into the human body as a document. Investigations of relevant literature from disciplines such as anthropology, art history, medical humanities, and sociology to capture multidisciplinary perspectives will also be considered.

In Consideration:

Theories and concepts related to document theory and the human body as a document.

Ethical and cultural dimensions of cosmetic modification and aesthetic surgeries.

The representation and commodification of the human body through social media.

The historic prevalence of human zoos and the display of bodies in art exhibitions, particularly Body Worlds.

Art projects that explore the themes of the thesis, such as Stelarc's "Third Hand" and Orlan's "The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan."

Investigations on social signifiers of "beauty" and the prevalence of the striving for physical "perfection," particularly through the work of Dr. Renee Engeln ("Beauty Sick"), Noami Wolf ("The Beauty Myth"), and Bernadette Wegenstein ("The Cosmetic Gaze")

LIS Sources, Starting Point

Brookes, B. C. (1980). The foundations of information science. Part I. Philosophical aspects. Journal of Information Science, 2(3–4), 125–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/016555158000200302

Buckland, M. (2011) 'What kind of Science can information science be?', Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 63(1), pp. 1–7. doi:10.1002/asi.21656.

Hjørland, B. (2000), "Documents, memory institutions and information science", Journal of Documentation, Vol. 56 No. 1, pp. 27-41. https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000007107

METHODOLOGY

The research will use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data.

Primarily, the research will rely on interviews with artists and collectors who work with the human body as a document, representing different sectors and perspectives. This involves first identifying artists who employ body art, performance art, or other mediums to convey the concept of the human body as a document and engaging with collectors who curate or preserve artifacts related to the human body, such as

anatomical models or medical manuscripts. (Carla Valentine of Barts Pathology Museum would be an ideal point of contact)

The researcher will also analyze social media platforms and art exhibitions to examine the representation and commodification of the human body.

The data collected will be analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to the research questions, particularly the representation and commodification of the human body through social media. The research will use critical discourse analysis to examine the historical and contemporary representation of the human body in exhibitions, such as Body Worlds. Statistical analysis to identify correlations between variables related to cosmetic modification and body image.

INTERVIEWS

Conducting interviews with artists and collectors who work with the human body as a document is an integral part of this study. These interviews will provide valuable insights into the perspectives, experiences, and practices related to the interpretation and preservation of the human body as a document. The interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that relevant topics and themes are covered consistently across all participants. The following steps will be followed:

Sampling

The selection of interview participants will be done purposefully to represent diverse sectors and perspectives within the field. The aim is to include artists and collectors who engage with the human body as a document in various ways, such as through visual art, performance art, or the curation of body-related artifacts.

Recruitment

Initial contact with potential interviewees will be established through various channels, such as professional networks, art organizations, museums, or galleries. A formal invitation will be sent, explaining the research objectives and emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation.

Informed Consent

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent will be obtained from each participant. They will be provided with a consent form detailing the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants, including confidentiality and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide will be developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for flexibility and organic conversation. The guide will include a set of core questions related to the participants' experiences, perspectives, and methodologies in working with the human body as a document. It will also incorporate follow-up prompts to explore emerging themes and delve deeper into specific areas of interest.

Sample Questions

Can you describe your artistic practice or collection that engages with the human body as a document? What motivated you to work with the human body in this way?

How do you perceive the human body as a document? What kinds of information or narratives do you believe it holds?

In what ways do you "read" or interpret the human body within your artistic practice or collection? Are there specific techniques or methodologies you employ?

Could you discuss any challenges or ethical considerations you encounter when working with the human body as a document? How do you navigate these challenges?

How do you engage with the concept of preservation or archiving in relation to the human body? What strategies or approaches do you employ to ensure the longevity and accessibility of the "document"?

Can you share any specific examples or projects that highlight the intersection between the human body and information in your work or collection? How does this intersection manifest itself?

How do you navigate issues of representation and consent when working with the human body as a document? How do you balance artistic expression with respect for the individuals involved?

Are there any specific legal or ethical frameworks that inform your practice or collection in relation to the human body as a document? How do these frameworks shape your decision-making process?

How do you perceive the role of libraries or information institutions in documenting or providing access to the human body as a document? Are there ways in which you believe these institutions can contribute to the field?

How do you see the potential for collaboration or interaction between artists, collectors, and library and information professionals in exploring the human body as a document? Are there any specific opportunities or challenges you foresee?

(These sample questions provide a starting point for engaging with artists and collectors and capturing their perspectives on the human body as a document. The interview guide can be further refined and expanded based on the specific interests and insights emerging from the literature review and initial interviews conducted.)

Conducting the interviews

The interviews will be conducted either in person or remotely, depending on the availability and preferences of the participants. A professional and respectful approach will be maintained to create a comfortable environment for open dialogue. The interviews will be audio-recorded with the participants' consent and supplemented with note-taking to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Data Analysis

The collected interview data will be transcribed verbatim and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Thematic analysis, following an iterative and inductive approach, will be employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the interview transcripts. The analysis will involve coding the data, organizing codes into categories, and identifying overarching themes.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations will be prioritized. Participants' confidentiality will be maintained through anonymization of data, and any potentially sensitive or personal information shared during the interviews will be handled with utmost care and respect.

By conducting interviews with artists and collectors, this research will provide firsthand perspectives and experiences that contribute to the exploration of the human body as a document within the field of Library

and Information Science. These interviews will offer unique insights into the interpretation, preservation, and presentation of the human body in different artistic and collection contexts, enriching our understanding of the subject.

DISSEMINATION

This research aims to engage with the public through various methods, including academic publications, presentations at conferences, and engagement with social media platforms. At the conclusion of the project, the dissertation will be submitted to City LIS Humanities Commons Website and there would be an aim to complete blog posts and articles exploring microcosms of the research in the lead up to completion.

WORK PLAN

April: Confirming a working title, and finding a supervisor

May: Submitting the proposal. Contact Point with Supervisor. Background literature review completed (majority complete though it will be ongoing) and semi-structured interview plan in place. Interviewees complied and initial contact made.

June: Contact Point with Supervisor. Interview process started. Blog posts/articles to track progress and investigate smaller avenues of query.

July: Contact Point with Supervisor. All interviews and research complied/complete. Dissertation in initial outline form.

August: Contact Point with Supervisor. Body of Dissertation filled in according to outline

September: Contact Point with Supervisor. Dissertation in editable draft form, aiming for completion 18 September--leaving 2 weeks for any remaining edits or referencing.

RESOURCES REQUIRED

Access to Internet: Zoom/ teleconferencing services for interviews and for literature review

ETHICS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

See Ethics Form, Separate

APPENDIX II: REFLECTION ON THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

This dissertation began as an overly ambitious project proposed in the confidence that it would be well-supported with university resources and supervision. The project was rejected for original supervisor approval multiple times before being accepted without consultation as the initial supervisor announced their resignation. As a result of administrative complications, this paper was produced nearly entirely without supervision, following a single[127] meeting with a temporary and inexperienced[128] supervisor.

Still, despite having to massively scale back the project, research got done and the extensive reading culminated in a final project I am relatively proud of, particularly as it was a result of unaccompanied efforts. I would be proud to see the work disseminated.[129] The original research aims to engage with the public through various methods, including academic publications, presentations at conferences, and engagement with social media platforms still hold. At the conclusion of the project, I still expect the dissertation will be submitted to City LIS Humanities Commons Website. I would ideally like to further the research through pursuit of a PhD, expanding on the ideas explored in the paper as microcosmic dives and as more lengthy endeavour.

[127] My initial supervisor ignored my requests for a meeting before departure and scheduling conflicts led to there being an opportunity for only one meeting in the very short time window City University had provided for new supervision before the new supervisor left on a pre-scheduled leave.
[128] I'm sorry Dominic. You were lovely and I am sure you did your best, but we are both unfortunate victims of City's administrative failings here.
[129] With permissions and without City University Administration taking any credit

APPENDIX III: INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH AARON VANHORN

Aaron VanHorn, 31M, is the product of a teen pregnancy and was given for adoption. His biological parents stayed together, producing four additional children: two full siblings and two half siblings (one from his father and one from his mother), a family he knows but is not integrated within. The familial situation retained full transparency throughout his life; he always knew he was adopted and it has been a permanent self-identifier.

This interview provides valuable insights into the impact of documentation, secrecy, and transparency in family dynamics and personal identity.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction:

Can you please provide a brief overview of your journey and experiences related to your adoption and the discovery of your biological siblings?

Adoption and Identity:

How has your adoption documentation, such as your adoption certificate or records, influenced your sense of identity and belonging throughout your life?

Could you share any instances where your adoption status affected your relationships or personal development?

DNA as Documentation:

DNA testing has become increasingly accessible. How did DNA testing play a role in revealing your biological siblings, and how do you perceive DNA as a form of documentation of your genetic heritage?

Has the knowledge of your biological siblings affected your self-identity or your sense of family and heritage?

Family Dynamics:

How did the revelation of your full biological siblings impact your relationships with your adoptive family and your newfound biological family members?

Were there any challenges or opportunities in navigating these complex family dynamics?

Secrecy vs. Transparency:

Were there any elements of secrecy or transparency surrounding your adoption or the existence of your biological siblings, and how did these factors influence your experiences and emotions?

In retrospect, do you think a more or less transparent approach to your adoption would have been beneficial?

Documentation in Personal Relationships:

Have you discussed your adoption and the discovery of your biological siblings with close friends or partners, and how has it influenced your personal relationships?

Have you encountered any misconceptions or stereotypes related to adoption and family in your interactions with others?

Legal and Ethical Considerations:

Do you believe there should be any legal or ethical guidelines regarding the disclosure of information about adoption and biological relatives? If so, what are your thoughts on this matter?

Coping and Emotional Impact:

How have you coped with the emotional challenges and joys that have arisen from your unique family situation?

Are there support networks or resources that have been particularly helpful to you in navigating these experiences?

Advice and Reflection:

What advice would you offer to individuals who may be in similar situations, either as adoptees or as individuals discovering long-held family secrets?

Is there anything you would like to add or reflect upon regarding the theme of documentation and family in your life?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Aaron VanHorn

Conducted over Google Teams, September 2023 by Mary Helen Mack

Aaron VanHorn

I have a very diverse family background. So, family can be distant a family can also be close. Like I'm very close with my mom, my adopted mom, Kelly. But then I'm also close with like my biological siblings, but I'm not as close with like my biological mom. And so, there's different levels to it.

Mary Helen Mack

So, this is what I meant by she might just

Aaron VanHorn

Oh, baby. Come on. Really? Why don't you do that? Well, it's

Mary Helen Mack

So, you're saying family means a lot. Can be distant, because you're closer to Kelly even though Kelly is not your biological mom.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, but I'm also close to my biological siblings, but not so much to my biological mom. So, there's varying levels to it. And I'm not sure how to explain that fully. But....the deep question, how do I extrapolate?

Mary Helen Mack

We can come back to it. Also, if you should think of anything later after this interview. Feel free to give me another call email, or anything like said this is a semi-structured interview so we have some guide questions but it is a bit more casual, like a conversation. And there is no right answer to really any of these. It's more how you feel and what you're feeling. So, beginning, does documentation DNA or lived experience count more in the creation or definition of a family?

Aaron VanHorn

Documentation, DNA, or lived experience? Oh, I think there's …I think there's an argument to be made that DNA and live experience both play equal, but can play both equal but separate parts in that. Documentation? Would that be more like...documentation would be more like… like keeping family records, right?

Mary Helen Mack

Documentation sort of in the sense, in this paper, I'm sort of talking about how DNA can be a form of documentation because documents we think of as sort of information containing items. But for the terms of this question, because I've separated DNA documentation, meaning more like Kelly and Tim are your adoptive parents, they have sort of legal guardianship of you, regardless of the DNA. So, from a legal perspective, they are more your parents. But from a biological perspective, your biological parents are your DNA. But then also, there's your lived experience, where it's not been a sort of closed adoption, where you didn't know who your birth parents were, you do have the relationship on both sides. So that's more lived outside the confines of strict paperwork or DNA.

Aaron VanHorn

Okay, yeah. I would say to me documentation doesn't play a huge role then it when I think about my family, because I am adopted legally, but because it is an open adoption, and because I am so close with my biological family, those lines are kind of blurred, where there, there's no... I didn't feel like I belonged solely to one side. I wasn't solely Tim and Kelly's, and I wasn't solely just my birth family, or just part of my birth family, where I was able to kind of take part in both as much as I wanted to, or as much as those sides of the family wanted me to.

Mary Helen Mack

Can you provide a brief overview of your journey and experiences related to your adoption, and your discovery of your biological siblings? At what point did you discover your biological family? I mean, I know from knowing you that you pretty much always knew that you were adopted. That was how you introduced yourself when you were three.

Aaron VanHorn

It was a big part of my identity and still, obviously, still is, but when I was a kid, it was something I was super proud about. Where I was like I was adopted it; it was like I have the family. I have my family and then I have like a secret family. A family that is also mine, but not one that anybody else will get to see or at least see me be a part of in the way you would see me with like Tim and Kelley. It can really feel like a superpower. But it also, like, something cool like something that was like mine,

Mary Helen Mack

All the best superheroes are adopted, or are taken care of by not their real parents. And pretty much all the Disney characters don't have real family. I mean, like real in the sense of like, I don't know what Disney has got against moms,

Aaron VanHorn

Their track record is pretty bad.

Mary Helen Mack

But it seems like everyone is somehow adopted or aunts and uncles or step parents. So, all the all the cool people are obviously

Aaron VanHorn

And I never I never there weren't a lot of other kids. Like the schools I went through that I knew that were adopted, there were maybe like one or two, but I wasn't close with anybody. So, it wasn't something I like had anybody else to identify with. So, it did feel like my own thing. But obviously, my.... there's a there's

a there's a there's a there's a relative that is on both sides of my family, on my biological side and my adopted side.

Mary Helen Mack

Really?

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, there's a common denominator. It's my grandma/ Great Grandma Judy, who, I'm going to say it slowly because it's many words but Judy is my adopted dad's father's like for, not like fun, but like, long term partner. So, I grew up with her as grandma Judy, who was with Grandpa Fred, Tim's dad for my entire life. Like before I was born, they got together.

Mary Helen Mack

So, it would be like your dad's stepmom, but not married.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah. Not married. But for all intents and purposes she was

Mary Helen Mack

Functionally, but that's also part of this, like what does family mean? It means exactly what you want it to mean. You don't need it. Many people refer to marriage as just a piece of paper. That's just a document.

Aaron VanHorn

Exactly. So, documentation, like she was not my grandma, but that's just how we grew up. She was our grandma. But she is also my biological mom's step mom's mother. So, she is my great grandma.

Mary Helen Mack

But not by blood, because if she's your biological moms step mom's

Aaron VanHorn

Mom. Yes. And then even to separate that further. My it's not my biological. Mom's parents died when she was young. Her mom passed when she was maybe like 14 and her dad passed when she was maybe like 12, I think. So, she was raised by her dad's best friend who is who just, we it's just grandpa Tom. And so, she was raised by not even her parents. She was raised by this other guy Tom,

Mary Helen Mack

who was a friend and again, not biologically related, but family in a community-oriented sense.

Aaron VanHorn

And so, she was raised by Tom and so her stepmom, Cara, Kara's mom is Judy.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, okay, got it.

Aaron VanHorn

I can provide a chart

Mary Helen Mack

Actually, it might be helpful.

Aaron VanHorn

The tree is quite splintered. But so, when my word got around in the family, my, my adoptive parents, Kelly and Tim, were looking to adopt they were looking into that option. And just timing wise. Tim's stepmom had heard that her daughter's daughter, their stepdaughter was 18 and pregnant and looking to put me up for adoption. And so that's how they met. They brought like the lawyers into it, of course. But there was no like state agency. Well, I mean, as much as the state needs to be involved in an adoption because there's some legality there. But it wasn't like an agency. It wasn't through a company. It was just through people that I was adopted.

Mary Helen Mack

Were Tim and Kelley looking to adopt?

Aaron VanHorn

They were. Well, I think they said they were open to it and then just timing-wise, I was already cooking and so it was, it was easy to mediate that introduction because it was just grandma Judy was on both sides and said, oh, actually, my granddaughter is looking is looking to put up a baby for adoption. Like, I'll introduce you. And so, it would be very, it would be, I think, ethically wrong to hide that. As parents, especially with that relation already being established with grandma, Judy.

Mary Helen Mack

I heard some stories online where they're like, “oh, I was actually my dad's brothers, kid.” And the whole family decided not to tell me until I was like, 30.

Aaron VanHorn

I cannot imagine how emotionally devastating that would be. I am so happy that did not happen to me, because I think that would really mess somebody up. Were like, wow, everybody knew except me. Yeah, that would really, that would be a total....

Mary Helen Mack

Well, I told you about like my cousin Stacy, who is very similar family situation to yours, except she's the oldest of the sort of siblings that were with the parents. Yeah, they had no idea that they had a full brother just out there in the world. She was 40, when she found.

Aaron VanHorn

(Pain noises)

Mary Helen Mack

Like I was there at her daughter's 21st birthday. In Vegas, she sat me down with a drink and said, "You will never believe what I found out this past week." And it wasn't even her parents that told her it was like her grandma, who was about to die, and was like, "I can't believe they never told you; let me let you know,"

Aaron VanHorn

“Can't take this with me....” That would be so overwhelming to learn that I'm very, very thankful, very happy that it's something I've always been able to process growing up and communication between the family stayed open. And I did go through a period where I felt uncomfortable by it for whatever reason, that's just childhood. I don't know getting older. But there was a time where I wouldn't/ didn't want to talk to like my biological mom, like she would call on like birthdays and stuff that I'd be like, oh, I don't want to talk. But as I got older, I think my interest in knowing that more kind of grew as and then social media came along. And I was able to connect through that rather than like calling or visiting. And so that became a big, a big piece of it. And that was where I actually I first reconnected with my two biological siblings, my full biological siblings was through Myspace.

Mary Helen Mack

Myspace!

Aaron VanHorn

Myspace profiles, I was like, "Oh my God. It's me."

Mary Helen Mack

So, in the footnotes, I'll put MySpace is a social media that used to exist. Have you seen those things? Where it's like every once in a while, someone to be like, "oh, when we played our records---- for those of you that don't know, records for like CDs, but bigger.... Oh, what's a CD? What do you mean? What's the CD? Shiny discs that have music on them before streaming...."

Aaron VanHorn

Was there music on there? Well, a series of lasers.

Mary Helen Mack

What happened if you step on it? You lost the music. And there was no way to get it back.

Aaron VanHorn

MySpace, an archaic form of social messaging? Yeah, go to that.

Mary Helen Mack

Did I tell you about one of my term papers where....one of the first term papers were supposed to analyse someone else's research, like basically: go to a legit published journal, find an article that has some original research and critique it.

Aaron VanHorn

Wow.

Mary Helen Mack

Basically, the person that I looked into; I spent the whole essay just ridiculing the fact that she did a social media study. That only analysed Facebook, like this Facebook group, just one group, this one group of like, 20 people in a neighbourhood Facebook group.

Aaron VanHorn

Okay, that's interesting....

Mary Helen Mack

And her specialty, I found on our website was like, oh, I want to increase internet literacy for young people. I was a bit brutal in the essay because I was like, "No one uses Facebook." Seven years ago, there was literally an ad, one of those millennials bashing things like "oh, I want to be an influencer or whatever." And, "well, what social media are you on?" and she starts listing them on the guy goes, "Oh, I'm surprised you didn't say Facebook." She goes, "haha, my parents are on Facebook." That was seven years ago, and it was being made fun even then oh, I thought it was gonna be more like: they're analysing like a neighbourhood watch group, which does get like.... well, they're like the, like the Facebook mom groups where they're just absolutely.... Facebook science, like the subreddit Facebook Science. Don't worry, my mom group told me that essential oils were the only thing needed, the hospital is not necessary.

Aaron VanHorn

I would love to examine those because if it's just like a random Facebook group, that's not fun.

Mary Helen Mack

No, it was also that her overarching conclusion was that people put things online, and they they edit their personal profiles to sort of influence how people perceive them. And I was like, that's your conclusion? Did we need research for that? I feel like...

Aaron VanHorn

that's pretty much what it was built for

Mary Helen Mack

I thought we were all sort of on board.

Aaron VanHorn

Like, it was abundantly clear.

Mary Helen Mack

Everyone knew that that's what it was here for. Anyway, that is a side tangent. So, it was a follow on to that last question. So how did you feel about sort of your full-blown siblings, the biological ones coming into the world? And that they were staying with your biological parents? Do you have any thoughts or feelings around that? Or were you pretty well with Tim/ Kelly at that point?

Aaron VanHorn

That's it. That's a good question. It never. It never made me upset. I think I used to reflect on like, why was like, why me? Like, not only was like, I understand, like two young people having a kid and like giving it up and like, we're not ready for that. And like, it's more common that at that point, they'll just split off and not be involved. But in this case, my biological parents were very young. Well, 18 and 23. But I mean, but they had me, they separated, got back together four years later had my brother and then like 18 months after that had my sister. And as I grew up, I used to it used to, not like bug me, but it would be like, "huh, that is interesting."

Mary Helen Mack

Wasn't there another? Three?

Aaron VanHorn

There are half siblings. So, after my biological parents then fully separated, after my two full blooded siblings, there was another child for each of them. So, I have a half-sister and a half the younger half-sister and a younger half-brother.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay

Aaron VanHorn

But it never, never made me upset. Because I think I think my parents did a good job under, under, or explaining the like the dynamic where they weren't ready for me at that time. Like, I think I kind of under also understood, just from it just from learning about hearing about who my biological parents were that I would have had a very messy life, myself, had I not been put up for adoption, because they were like very heavy drug users. They were alcoholics. And it was it just wasn't, it wouldn't have been a good recipe. And so, I never felt I was never upset. It was I did feel like sad, maybe a little bit like, oh, like I would have loved to be in like a family have that family kind of dynamic with them. But also, I think had I not been given up for adoption, that that dynamic would not be

Mary Helen Mack

Would not have even existed as it currently exists.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, yeah. So, I think I'm more thankful for how it is now rather than what could have been.

Mary Helen Mack

Moving on to the next question, by the way, I've got like sort of you on one side, and then questions that I wrote ahead of time to keep myself on track a little bit on the other side, so if I'm looking to the side, reading questions, how has your adoption documentation such as your adoption certificate records, influenced your sense of identity and belonging throughout your life? Also, I've just got a pop up from Google meets that we've got fifteen minutes left. So, if this cuts out, I'll send you another link.

Aaron VanHorn

Will it do that? Well, it does. Like it should recognise we're both still on. It's almost Google's like, that's enough.

Mary Helen Mack

Like I was on the call with my cousin for an hour and a half. And now it's like you got an hour.

Aaron VanHorn

That's enough outta you!

Mary Helen Mack

You've obviously been talking too long. But I'm, I would totally just send it on.

Aaron VanHorn

Right? We'll cross that bridge when we get there.

Mary Helen Mack

Like something it just cuts off. Just keep an eye on your email, I'll send you another.

Aaron VanHorn

Okay, I won't forget. Question. What was the question again?

Mary Helen Mack

Let's see, how has your adoption documentation such as certificate and records, like document documents influenced your sense of belonging throughout your life? Or has it?

Aaron VanHorn

I don't think I've ever thought about it until just now. But I don't think I've ever seen any sort of documentation that lists out me as being adopted. I don't even know if that exists. Because typically, if you would go through like an agency, there would be like applications and there would be forms or it'd be for there'd be a lot of formality to it. But since this was this was through like a known party. I don't think I've ever asked my parents that either. That might this might be some, like, ask them. And then I can provide some more context for later. But I think in my case, there might have just been legal documents like contracts, although I do know, yeah, I think it would have just been like a cop, maybe not even a contract. Who knows. But I do know, in the state [Oregon] back, back when I was adopted in the 90s. Oregon had, I don't even know if it's a law, but maybe like a stipulation. Where is it? It might be 30, between 30 to 60 days, up to 30, or up to 60 days where the parent that gives up their child for adoption can fully like do like a take-backs. Like they can, they're allowed to, within a certain amount of time, say actually, I don't want to give them up for adoption. I would like to reclaim that. And I do remember, like, as a kid, my mom saying they were very worried that my birth parents would like do that would file that claim to have me returned. So there had to be some sort of document signing for them to understand that agreement. But I don't know that there are contracts either.... I'm gonna find out.

Mary Helen Mack

[interview cut out and new meeting link sent] We're back! Yes. I've also, like I said, I've emailed you all the questions that we're generally going over. So, if you should read through them later, and think I actually now have a very good answer for that. Okay, where were we? The next question for the adoption identity is: Can you share any instances where your adoption status affected your relationships or personal development in any way? And again, if you not thinking of anything is a completely valid thing? Or if you have anything, let's hear it.

Aaron VanHorn

Can you repeat it one more time?

Mary Helen Mack

So, the question we had before this was how your documentation influenced your sense of identity. We talked about the lack of documentation. Now, could you share any instances where your adoption status affected your relationships or personal development?

Aaron VanHorn

Oh, yeah. I think one of the, it wasn't in like a drastic way, it didn't affect much. But when I started to get to know like, my biological family better, it was like after I turned 18, and I decided to like go visit them for like, a couple of weeks, just because I wanted to, like fully expose myself to that side of the family. And rather than in the past, growing up, we would do like holiday visits sometimes. But it'd be very sporadic like once every couple of years or a couple times a year, and then not for like, the next year. And so, as a teenager decided to like go spend like two weeks and live with, like, my little brother, little sister, and then the grandparents who are taking care of them at that time. And I think it affected my relationship with my

adopted parents. Not in like a big way, but it I saw not like jealousy, but maybe more like, worry in them where they were like, "oh, he's going to go visit this family like, is he going to, like think differently? us as a family now? Is this going to affect our dynamic, where now he is going to see this side? That is, like, for them? It was more like, what could have been for me? Is he going to see that and wish he had had that growing up? It's kind of like destabilise this relationship." But it didn't. It was, I think I had a pretty good handle on it. And I was doing it more so for my benefit. To understand, like my background, and what my biological background, and I think it was like really helpful, actually. But I don't think it's ruined any relationships are strained any relationships.

Mary Helen Mack

It's just interesting to hear you say that Tim and Kelly had that sort of maybe concern, especially in light of sort of what's going on with Jeremy [Aaron's non-bio brother, also adopted by Tim and Kelly] and his adopted mom, like, I'm a little bit thinking, "well, the fears were not unfounded." Maybe they were a little bit with you. But….

Aaron VanHorn

A good point! With me, yeah, they were a little unfounded. But then with Jeremy, that was a, that was a complete reversal, that they were very founded in a like, I don't want to say but worst-case scenario, because so far, it's actually worked out fine. Like, how he's living the life he wants to live in. There's, there's not a lot of tension or anything, but he fully, like went that extra mile and is like trying to separate himself and live with his what would have been his original name, which is such a weird thing to experience itself. But for me, personally, I did not do that.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. Next section is DNA is documentation. So, DNA testing has become increasingly accessible. Did any kind of DNA testing play a role in revealing any biological siblings? I would imagine, not as far as what we've gone through so far. But how do you perceive DNA as a form of documentation of your sort of genetic heritage?

Aaron VanHorn

Ah, we didn't do any, any DNA testing, although I kind of want to, although I'm worried about the ethics behind it,

Mary Helen Mack

like a 23andme sort of DNA testing? Or general like heritage, "you're X percent ...." I hate to break it to you, you're going to be Irish, mostly. [Note: Both Aaron and Mary Helen have naturally vibrant red hair and lots of freckles]

Aaron VanHorn

I do anticipate that, but I think it'll open up, and it's more I would want heritage, I would want to see more of the lineage rather than just like the statistical breakdown. I would want to see. I would want to more trace like living in July and see that

Mary Helen Mack

oh, like ancestry?

Aaron VanHorn

I would want to see that more So, so than knowing like I'm this person. On this, you know, the red hair --- dead giveaway.

Mary Helen Mack

Did you see that interview with Conan O'Brien where he's like "I did that. I'm 100% Irish." And they're like, "We never see 100% Do you know what that means?" "I'm special?" "No. inbred"

Aaron VanHorn

"We never see this, 100%" That is wild. Which I mean, it makes sense--look at him.

Mary Helen Mack

But the red hair is it's quite a giveaway.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, a big marker. But DNA as documentation. I think it's also something you can see in your family where.... I don't know if this is on a similar level, but like nature versus nurture. There's a lot in nature, there's a lot that is naturally that are nature has a huge part in in your physical identity, I think or your identity and think, and I didn't, I didn't think it would, I didn't think it would I thought nurture would be like a much bigger part, which it is. But after like getting to know my biological siblings realising maybe it was incredible to realise how similar we all are, despite living very different lives. Like neurotically, like, we, me and my biological brother, we have like the same like kind of walk, like we walk very similarly. Which is weird. And like, like, when we first started, when I first started meeting them, and like hanging out with them, we were walking somewhere and my sister took the video from behind. And it was like, it was so strange to watch. Because just naturally, we both have like the same stride. And like we talk the same, we have the same kind of same kind of like OCD tendencies. So, I think there's a lot to be said that nature has a has a big, big effect. And how you develop. DNA runs deep.

Mary Helen Mack

Has the knowledge of your biological siblings affected your self-identity or your sense of family, like more so than it would, had your biological parents not had more children?

Aaron VanHorn

I think it did have an effect on me because it was some even growing up it was knowing that they were out there. And knowing that I had siblings of the same relation that came from the same two parents. It's something I kind of craved. Because Jeremy... Growing up with Jeremy was a very different experience. We are not the same in any way shape, or form. But knowing that there is like that is a relationship I could have had grown up with a sibling that I did have much more in common with. That is something I did kind of want as a kid. I wanted like a closer relationship. But I mean, the way it the way it's turned out, I'm more than happy with like, I'm very close to them now. But growing up, it was sort of like I wish I could see them more I wish I did. I think even as a kid, I would ask my parents like "can we adopt them too????"

Mary Helen Mack

At least you're asking, "Can we adopt them too?" not "can I go back?" from their perspective

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, no, actually, that was that's actually a very funny thing to put out. I don't think I ever said "I want to go live with them." I was always like, "could we bring them here?"

Mary Helen Mack

They need to come here. I'm not going there.

Aaron VanHorn

I was actually very fun. Yeah, but I did, I always wanted to be around them.

Mary Helen Mack

How did the revelation of your biological siblings impact your relationship with your adoptive family, and these new family members, or have did it? You sort of covered this a little bit already

Aaron VanHorn

Didn't have a grand impact, at least I don't think it did. It was it just felt like another piece to like my weird life puzzle. I'm happy they're around. I love them. I want to see that more. But I don't think it was never bad. There's nothing negative about having them or knowing them

Mary Helen Mack

Just as a follow up to that one: Were there any challenges or opportunities in navigating complex family dynamics?

Aaron VanHorn

Maybe not, maybe not external, but maybe more internal challenges where it was, like growing up apart from my biological family, I would, I would kind of imagine what their lives were like, or how they lived and then live are getting to know them being around them. And seeing that they live life very differently than I had imagined that were, like, my two biological siblings didn't really grow up with our biological parents. They were, they were mostly with the grandparents. The biological parents were very in and out of their lives like are my biological dad's like, of he's a fisherman. So, he would fish in Alaska, for like, eight months out of the year or something like that, when they were kids. So, he was very much not around a lot. And then for biological mom, she was just kind of a mess. She So, would be in and out of like rehab or, and then out of like, detention facilities. And so, I, in my head, I thought of them more like a nuclear family, where they were around a lot like I knew my biological parents weren't together, they were separated, but I thought it was I always imagined them as a more cohesive family that I was just missing. But it was very splintered, it was very shattered.

Mary Helen Mack

Anything further to add on that sort of dynamic? Because now moving on to: secrecy and transparency! Were there any elements of secrecy or transparency surrounding your adoption, or the existence of that you were adopted your biological siblings? And how did these influence your experiences and emotion? And in retrospect, do you think a more or less transparent approach would have been beneficial?

Aaron VanHorn

I think I am fairly unique in my adoption experience where there was no secrecy whatsoever. I don't think there's been any point in my life where I've learned something new about the circumstances of my adoption, that, like were a shock to me, maybe they were like, minute things were like my biological mom: she originally didn't want to give me up. But she spoke to like a nun. Or she happened to me, and then who, like sat her down and like, talked with her and was like, "where do you see yourself with this in this journey? Like? Do you think you are able to take care of a child right now?" And she just kind of guided my mom and my mom eventually made the realisation like, “no, I can't do this.” Like, I'm not in a place where I'm going to be able to give this kid what they need. And so, she decided to put me up for adoption. And that was something I learned later in life. And I was like, wow, that's really beautiful. I love that. But as a kid, I was just like, I always just knew kind of the basic like, she couldn't, she wasn't able to. So, she just gave me I didn't know. There was like, a lot of like, thought or not a lot of thought, but a lot of guidance behind it, I guess. But apart from that, it's everything's, it's always been super transparent, which I'm so thankful for. Because I think I would have very much internalised it. If I was one of the people that found out, found out I was adopted later than later in life. And I had such a big family that I didn't even know about. I feel

for the people that find out when they're like 30 that they were adopted, and they have like siblings, I'm like, "Oh my gosh." That'd be so stressful.

Mary Helen Mack

There're more and more stories about those because of things like, you know, 23andme or those kinds of things where it's like, "oh, yeah, here's all these half siblings you internalized might not have known about." Next question: Have you discussed your adoption or discovery of your biological family, with close friends or partners? How has that influenced your personal relationships? And have you ever encountered misconceptions or stereotypes related to adoption and family, in your interactions with other people

Aaron VanHorn

I only ever encountered misconceptions once, and it's with my very lovable doofus of a roommate, Matt. Otherwise no, like, I'm very matter of fact about it. I'm very open about it. Even at this new job, I mean, people will come up to me and be like Van Horn like, "is that Dutch?" And I'm like, "I am adopted. I don't know. I think it's Belgium," I'm sure, then they're like, "Oh, wow." And they tried to get into my family history as if I'm like a Dutch person. And I'm like, "I'm not, like I'm very much Irish. I don't know anything." As you can see by my face... I know as much as you do at this point. I don't know where Van Horn came from. But the only misconception I've ever run into was when I told Matt, he those kinds of things was my friend before he was my roommate, but I'm like, oh, yeah, I'm adopted, blah, blah, blah. And then there's one day over quarantine. We were just kind of talking just not much else to do. And we were getting deeper into it. And he's like, so your step parents like, how's your relationship with them? And I was like, "my step parents?" and I was like, "Well, I don't really have step parents, I guess, like my biological parents have remarried. But I'm so far removed from that. I wouldn't call them my step parents." He's like, "No, the ones you grew up with." And I was like, "Well, my parents never divorced, or my adopted parents never divorced or remarried." He's like, "No, I mean them." And I'm like, "what" he's like, "when you're adopted, don't they just become your step parents?" And I was like, "what," He's like, "I thought that was just a general term for parents that are not really your parents?" And I was like, "oh, no no no", but I can understand that.

Mary Helen Mack

A lot of step parents do adopt the kids if they're coming in later? And I suppose that that could also be a Disney movie thing: the stepmother situation.

Aaron VanHorn

But he was under the impression that step parent was just a blanket term for anybody that was not your biological parent. I'm like, "oh, no, I would just call them parents, not step parents." That's the only thing; that's the only misconception I've ever run into. Two years ago.

Mary Helen Mack

I don't know if I even call that a misconception so much as just, he didn't get it. Also feel like you're generally quite open with what I'd say close friends, partners, and general other personal relationships; you are quite straightforward. Also, your mom [Kelly] is generally straightforward as well, even so much that when we pulled her aside and said, "Please tell Raisin that we are siblings, that Aaron is adopted, and my parents were the ones who gave him up" And she just went, "Yep. True, true story." [Note: Mary Helen and Aaron are not related in any way, they are friends who coincidentally look very similar]

Aaron VanHorn

Without missing a beat. "True story. Mary Helen's, parents didn't want him, so…" "We wanted one, so…" worked out." Yeah, I think that's always helped. She's always just been so bluntly honest about it, too.

Mary Helen Mack

Alright, legal and ethical considerations: Do you believe that there should be legal or ethical guidelines regarding the disclosure of information about adoption, and biological relatives? If so, what are your thoughts?

Aaron VanHorn

I think there should be. I think there should at least be ethical guidelines. Maybe that's just because of my own experience where nothing's ever really been hidden from me. I've never had to go digging for anything. Were just having it be so open and honest. It's just so.... it just feels it's just very natural. It's just like, why would you hide that it's just part of their identity. It's not something to be ashamed of. There's no.... I mean, maybe in some circumstances, there would be like safety reasons or something for somebody to not know they're adopted, but I feel like it would be a very extreme, isolated case.

Mary Helen Mack

That were the exception not the rule.

Aaron VanHorn

The exception not the rule, but for the most part I just, think transparency is really the way to go.

Mary Helen Mack

Because you do see so many of those stories online where someone's like, "I didn't know until I was fully an adult person."

Aaron VanHorn

Like... what a burden to give somebody. Especially with like a delayed, like a delayed friggin like bomb or something. Where when you're young, you can process it or you can process it in a different way, but when you're older, you might not have as many family members around to give you like insight or context or, you know, your biological parents could be long gone by that point. And so, you're really just going to be missing out on a lot of, it's just going to be something that'll, that'll be like kind of like a little like some in the back of your head, like I could have known this whole time, like I could have reached out, I could have talked to them.

Mary Helen Mack

It's sort of like, you spend years forming your identity, about like, "who am I as a person?" That's generally something you do as a teenager, and as a young adult, you know, like in your 20s, where you think "what kind of person am I?" And to sort of build this solid image, personhood and your image and the way you think of yourself and then to be told, yeah, that's incorrect.

Aaron VanHorn

We're just gonna pull out the friggin, we're gonna pull the rug out from under you real quick,

Mary Helen Mack

Your house was built on a swamp, and

Aaron VanHorn

it's sinking fast, to have to reformulate your identity at such a late stage in your life would be, I think that would be immense. So, I think ethically like it ethically, you should, you should, it should be transparent, maybe, but also, like closed adoptions, like legally are a thing where somebody giving up the child does not want to be contacted. And that's totally fine. But that child should be able to know like, you know, this is where you come from. This is just your circumstances, rather than years down the line be like....

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I get what you mean. There are the closed adoptions, but as an adult, you can make that decision, you are informed. The kid cannot make that decision to not know, and to be kept in ignorance is a bit bad, because there's loads of reasons why someone would want a closed adoption, especially if the circumstances of conception was quite traumatic. As we know, in America, you can't get rid of those things.....

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah....

Mary Helen Mack

And sometimes it is, like, you just say, actually, I don't want a reminder, I want I would like the child to have a loving home and to survive, but it's not to be there. But that doesn't mean that the child should then not be informed that they're adopted. They can be told "it's okay. Adoption is a thing", because also there's, I think, sort of things like that perpetuate a stigma around adopted kids. Making it a secret makes it seem like it is something that somehow bad. Whereas if everyone just like "it is what it is," it's like being left-handed, it's just a thing that happens. Not like any better or worse

Aaron VanHorn

It's not something to hide. It's not something to be.... because that's noy something to be ashamed of for sure.

Mary Helen Mack

I always also kind of like the comeback with the kids being "like my parents picked me. Yours just kind of got what they got.

Aaron VanHorn

My parents actually picked me

Mary Helen Mack

So, you say "I was hand selected. I was bespoke. You're a surprise bag" I guess not bespoke because bespoke is more what I would say for the designer babies.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

Did you ever watch the movie Gattaca? I feel like everyone in America saw that in high school.

Aaron VanHorn

A long time. High school might have been the last time,

Mary Helen Mack

That's another thing that's coming up in this paper is designer babies. Because that's DNA but you can also edit it

Aaron VanHorn

That team! where was it? They were just able to like produce cells. What did it do? It produced its own embryos. And like from cells, they produced an embryo and the embryo evolved to a point where it's able to give off the hormones needed to set off a pregnancy test as pregnant. And so, like designer babies are going to be a thing. I mean, they are to a certain degree already, but like fully designer, babies are going to be a thing.

Mary Helen Mack

Right now, I think the most sort of mainstream is that you can screen for a bunch of stuff. And then well, not in America because we can't, but in many places, you can terminate if the pregnancy is not viable or if there's some kind of genetic condition. So, in a way, you're sort of picking the baby, but it's more like a roll of the dice. And then if it doesn't work out, you're rerolling. In the future, designer babies might be more like "you are pregnant, we have screened for these things, you don't need to give up this pregnancy, we're just going to edit what we've got."

Aaron VanHorn

That'd be crazy.

Mary Helen Mack

Which of course, everyone's like, "Oh, that'd be so great for like diseases and stuff." But then where do we stop? I mean, that's the whole point of Gattaca where they're like, of course, we want the diseases like, "oh, when we're also screening, just to make sure that he's not gonna have male pattern baldness and that he's gonna be tall"

Aaron VanHorn

everybody's just gonna be 5'11" in the future.

Mary Helen Mack

5'11" That's the height?

Aaron VanHorn

6 is too much. That's too much power. Too much ego. Too tall. They're not tall enough to make it their identity.

Mary Helen Mack

How tall is Joe Jonas?

Aaron VanHorn

He is quite small. He is five.... I would say it's probably like 5'10".

Mary Helen Mack

I was gonna say: they're all gonna be like if Joe Jonas was slightly taller when Sophie holds the remote.

Aaron VanHorn

She might be. Well how tall is tall though?

Mary Helen Mack

I don’t know, I mean, I think she was like, 5'11", because she's like, tall but not like a giant.

Aaron VanHorn

Joe Jonas is 5'7".

Mary Helen Mack

That's not super short. Actually, I don't even know.

Aaron VanHorn

She's 5'9". Yeah, that's not super short.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm between 5'7" and 5'8", depending on how much I've stretched and various other factors. But like, I'm somewhere in there. Sam is exactly my same height. And we just saw him.

Aaron VanHorn

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Okay, yeah. I have a hard time gauging height.

Mary Helen Mack

I think Karo's 5.... I want to say Karo was like, 5'10".

Aaron VanHorn

I think she is. How tall is Alex? He's like 6'3"/6'2",

Mary Helen Mack

I think?

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, because he's taller than me. I can't, I can't remember

Mary Helen Mack

All I know is I can wear all my heels. I think a lot of guys are like hung up on height a little bit. Whereas almost every girl I've ever spoken to has basically been like, "oh, yeah, height doesn't matter at all. It's just two factors you have to consider when dating a shorter guy one, did he lie about his height? Like if you're on a dating app, and you're like, I'm five, eight, and he goes on five, nine, and then you meet and he is clearly not taller than you? Why is he lying about something so easily verifiable?

Aaron VanHorn

Then that's a big thing for guys. I think it would be a big thing for me if I was short. I'd be very obsessed with it. It doesn't actually matter though. I saw a video of this couple and they were having a game night and like, just as like a bit, the wife: she called her husband a short King in front of their friends. And he just started to lose it. Angrily, he was like "short King. Short King?!? I'm 5'11"!" And they're like, and all of them. Everybody at the table just kind of stopped, going 'No, you're not 5'11" He's like, "let's measure!" And he was like, 5'9". Many times, so upset. He's like, "I'm 5'11"!" and just repeats it. I wonder.... and like on your driver's license, you self-report your height. So, on his license, it must say 5'11"

Mary Helen Mack

The self-reporting on licensure is so wild to me.

Aaron VanHorn

How is that allowed?

Mary Helen Mack

It's also that we give like, as an example, trans people have such a hard time because it's like, you self-report on literally everything else. And even if you have all the documentation that you're... say you're female to male, you're saying "I'm male now." And they're like "but you need to prove it." Everything else is self reported. People put weights down that are not at all true.

Aaron VanHorn

No, I'm sure mine's way off now

Mary Helen Mack

Last time, I had my license renewed I was way skinnier than I am now. And am I going to change it? No, absolutely not. And I'm probably just going to tell them to leave it the same next time,

Aaron VanHorn

Let it roll over, it's okay

Mary Helen Mack

But that's just it's the self-reporting

Aaron VanHorn

Maybe need a little more checks and balances.

Mary Helen Mack

And see how like, you know, they have the rulers by the door that have the height thing-- mostly for security cameras-- because it helps them identify people if they come in, but it's that people come in and say the wrong height. It's like: they know. they know because they've got those measure sticks

Aaron VanHorn

You realize we can see you right?

Mary Helen Mack

And you can't, you can't renew online with the DMV, you have to wait in that awful line for many hours.

Aaron VanHorn

Think I have to do that next year. I'm so mad.

Mary Helen Mack

DMV, absolutely disgusting. Alright, moving on. How have you coped with the emotional challenges and joys that have arisen from your unique family situation? Are there support networks or resources that have been particularly helpful in any of this?

Aaron VanHorn

I think I have coped incredibly well. When I when I was a kid, my coping was trying to look for there's trying to look for similar situations to mine and like movies, because that's what I identified with most. So, like in The Fox and the Hound. The fox is adopted by that old lady and then is, in turn, abandoned at the end when she can no longer take care of him.

Mary Helen Mack

That wasn't her fault. That was definitely the fault of the dude with the hound.

Aaron VanHorn

It was to do with that. As a kid I coped by watching that and being like "me too!" be like "that's what happened to me" or like in Lilo.

Mary Helen Mack

Lilo and Stitch--- I remember you loved that.

Aaron VanHorn

Like I love. I'm a sucker for an adoption story. And so, I would always look for my like my story reflected in that sort of way. And I would use that as kind of like a bounce board for myself and being like, Yeah, but like I can, like, I can accept it like it's, it's fine. My family still loves me.

Mary Helen Mack

Ohana means family.

Aaron VanHorn

Lilo and Stitch was game changing.

Mary Helen Mack

I still absolutely love that movie. I don't know if you know cinema therapy on YouTube. They recently did a Lilo and Stitch episode. I mean, I say recently, I think it was like five months ago. They basically watch movies, and then they talk about like sort of lessons that can be applicable in like a therapeutic context to this. Like I also recently watched where they compared Morticia and Gomez in the 1990s Addams Family movie, to John Gottman 's Book Seven Principles for Making a marriage work, which is all about like how to build very healthy relationships. And I've got that book and they were like, here's what this means is that you're building a relationship. Their relationship is not for everyone, but you see how like they're constantly checking in with each other and they're saying to each other's needs, and they're very focused, just great cinema therapy. But I was watching the Lilo and Stitch one and they played clips from the movie. And Alex came home and I was absolutely sobbing. And he was like, "oh my God! did something happen?" And then I was just sitting there like "stitch feels like he doesn't have a family but he's so loved!" and Alex is like "wait, Lilo and Stitch? didn't that movie come out like years ago?" Like it's so good. So good. Even if little clips

Aaron VanHorn

I just pulled it up. I'm gonna watch that. Added to my watch list! Because yeah, that movie helped me as a kid contextualise adoption for myself, even though the circumstances are different. But seeing it from the side where the like Nani is going to have to give up her child seeing that helped me process a lot

Mary Helen Mack

Because Nani was also so young

Aaron VanHorn

Young sixteen, right?

Mary Helen Mack

She was 18? Like she was.... I've no idea how old Nani was but old enough to be a guardian presumably. I just know that she was still a teenager, so very much a teenager.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah, between 16 and 18, though, but still like a kid herself. And like, that's what she's burdened with. That's a lot to do. I just popped it up. The newest cinema therapy they posted is Mrs. Doubtfire, dealing with divorce.... I'm sure he did not deal with that the right way.

Mary Helen Mack

I saw that episode. They actually do make some really good points, especially about how they handled the mom's new boyfriend character. Because they were originally going to go with like, basically, in the original script, him being a complete dick. Like, you know, the stereotypical like, "ooh, the new person is absolutely terrible. And yeah, the mom and dad are gonna obviously get back together at the end." Robin Williams, I think, was the one that said, "No, we have to make him nicer, because kids need to know that their parents aren't always going to get back together. And the step parent is not usually, even in normal circumstances, a terrible person. In fact, sometimes you can become a better person by separating from a toxic situation. And that doesn't mean that the kids are going to be any less loved or cared for." But they couldn't make him a total dick to be like, "Oh, yeah. Well, Robin Williams is obviously the protagonist and so he's the better choice." And they're like, no, they had to legitimately say, "sometimes people separate and they end up with people that are better choices."

Aaron VanHorn

Maybe I will watch that episode. Yeah, that makes sense.

Mary Helen Mack

But yeah, Robin Williams not exactly handling that divorce in a good....

Aaron VanHorn

like the worst possible way.

Mary Helen Mack

But I really liked that show generally, even though they have too many ad breaks, in my opinion,

Aaron VanHorn

I have noticed that on so many videos, the ad breaks now are insane, if you watch like Corridor Crew-- they're the ones that do the visual effects breakdowns. Seen it? You would love them. They go through and they break down visual effects and like tons of movies, TV shows. But they, as part of their like video, they have an advertisement in the video that helps them generate revenue.

Mary Helen Mack

No

Aaron VanHorn

The sponsored posts section. Yeah. And then that, in that in-video ad will immediately play into a YouTube ad. And it's like, why does this not count?

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, it's always an unskipable ad, too. It's like a 30 second unskipable ad, followed by another 30 second unskipable ad.

Aaron VanHorn

Back in my day, YouTube didn't have ads.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, it didn't

Aaron VanHorn

Remember what they first started doing that? And I was like, "YouTube's dead to me."

Mary Helen Mack

And here we are. We're still there.

Aaron VanHorn

Here. We are still chained to them.

Mary Helen Mack

Well, they're just so convenient. It's like Google. I know that they're harvesting my data and that they're an evil corporation. But... did you seen that Simpsons episode where it's like one of the one's where they show them in the future? And Lisa is a mom and her daughter's in basically the metaverse and she goes in to get her. And she's saying "Google, you may have enslaved half the human race, but you're still a damn fine search engine."

Aaron VanHorn

It's true. Got us good.

Mary Helen Mack

We'll never escape. It's also like Amazon, I try so hard to be like, I'm going to buy locally sourced things from like shops and stuff. Amazon just has the thing that I need, like the one very specific item that I can't find elsewhere

Aaron VanHorn

I just bought, Maybe in Another Time?

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, Maybe in Another Life. [A book Mary Helen recommended to Aaron outside this interview]

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah. Maybe in another life. I just bought that. Because I went to two local bookstores that didn't have it. Then I went to Barnes and Noble and it was like $18. And then I went to Amazon and it was like 10 bucks. And I was like and now it showed up in one day.

Mary Helen Mack

And it's just there the next day. It's just so convenient. So yeah, it's because Taylor Jenkins Reid has a lot of books. And Maybe in Another Life, it's just not one that's ever gone viral in any kind of way. Unlike Malibu Rising, I think was the book of the summer, either this summer or last summer. So, it was all over booktok. Everyone said "perfect beach read" or whatever. And now she has Carrie Soto is Back as the most recent one, which is also like very summery read, because it's all about playing tennis. And everyone's like "old money aesthetic. I'm going to read about tennis." And then Daisy Jones and the Six, which is now a TV series, so people are getting into it. And those are all sort of her viral books, which are, they're still good. But Maybe in Another Life just for some reason never went that viral.

Aaron VanHorn

So interesting. Just yesterday in like the book section at Barnes and Noble where her books were. There were two girls there. And one of them was telling her friend, she's like "I've read that one. And that one and that one and that one" And I was holding Maybe in Another Life, and I was just like, "have you read this one? Good?" And she was like, "I haven't read that one." And I was like, "damn it. I want to know what you think." But yeah, she had read like every other book except Maybe in Another Life.

Mary Helen Mack

I think it's the best one. But like, no one ever talks about it.

Aaron VanHorn

I'm so excited to read it. I just, I'm like halfway through The Dinner by Herman Koch... Caulk?

Mary Helen Mack

I was gonna say, is it Koch? It seems like.... cock

Aaron VanHorn

You know, it probably is, just I hope it's not, for their sake. Rough childhood.

Mary Helen Mack

I think that'd be sort of like the Young Frankenstein. It's Frankenstein. It's pronounced Coach. Actually.

Aaron VanHorn

I'm gonna read Maybe in Another Life after, after I finish The Dinner.

Mary Helen Mack

Let me know what you think. I'm like, it just it sort of sticks with you. I love alternate timeline stuff. All right, enough tangents. And then my final questions were advice and reflection. What advice would you have to offer an individual who may be in a similar situation either as an adoptee or discovering long held family secrets?

Aaron VanHorn

Explore those secrets as much as you want to. Don't be afraid of them? I think finding out more about yourself is more freeing than doing that. Like, what if, what if it's bad? Like what if? I mean, it could be, you know, what if....

Mary Helen Mack

[Holds up Book titles "What If?]

Aaron VanHorn

Ooh. I don't know that one? Ooh, okay, dang, another book I want to check out

Mary Helen Mack

This one is absolutely insane. What if? Because it's stuff like, basically it's the guy that does XKCD little stick comics.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

He just has a website where people dump questions. And he answers them. Like, one that I've bookmarked for this paper is: This may be a bit gruesome, but if someone's DNA suddenly vanished, how long would that person last? And they answer it very seriously. Apparently they consulted with loads of people in this, and if you lost your DNA, you would instantly lose about a third of a pound. I don't recommend this strategy, there are easier ways to lose the 1/3 pound, including taking off your shirt, peeing, cutting off your hair (assuming you have a lot of it), donating blood but then cutting off the IV once it reaches 150ml. Holding a three foot diameter balloon full of helium will make you lose that much. Removing one of your fingers... But then they also illustrate [Holding up book]

Aaron VanHorn

Oh, I'm gonna get that book.

Mary Helen Mack

What would happen if you tried to fly a normal Earth airplane above different solar system bodies? And then they like explain it like with this handy chart of various different scenarios. Okay. Some of them are absolutely insane, though, like what would happen if everyone understood as close to each other as they possibly could, and then all jumped at the same time and landed at the same time? And everything is answered very seriously, except for a couple of questions where they put like weird and worrying questions. "Would it be possible to get your teeth to such a cold temperature that they would shatter upon drinking a hot cup of coffee?"

Aaron VanHorn

Pass. I don't want to know.

Mary Helen Mack

And he just put a stick figure at a computer and said "thank you, Shelby. For my new recurring nightmare."

Aaron VanHorn

Actually, oh my God. Oh, that

Mary Helen Mack

How many houses are burned down in the United States every year? What would be the easiest way to increase that number by a significant amount, say at least 15%? "Hello, police. I have this website where people submit questions..."

Aaron VanHorn

There's an exceptionally concerning one.

Mary Helen Mack

So, you think about "what if" --- including the DNA thing as a footnote

Aaron VanHorn

I think people should absolutely take a chance, and if you're presented with late in life information, absolutely. Go all in, find out. You're always going to be curious. Otherwise, they will be left wondering what if? And that just seems unfulfilling.

Mary Helen Mack

So go forth and adventure.

Aaron VanHorn

Adventure. Exactly. You couldn't have the time of your life, you could meet your next best friend, that happens to be your long-lost brother. You never know.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, and then the final question is, is there anything you would like to add? Regarding theme of documentation and family? Or extra on anything that we've talked about?

Aaron VanHorn

I am gonna go back over the questions and, and extrapolate maybe, and I'm gonna draw a, I'll do that today. We'll maybe we'll put pictures I'm going to do a family tree.

Mary Helen Mack

Yes, I will like that. Apparently, presentation also counts in this.

Aaron VanHorn

Yeah. I want to read this once. It's all finished too.

Mary Helen Mack

I might send it to you for editing.

Aaron VanHorn

Okay, yeah, I'll take it

Mary Helen Mack

Amazing

INTERVIEW WITH CATY BROWN:

Caty Brown, 60F, is the product of a sperm doner during a time when this was highly stigmatized. The revelation of her biological origins did not come about until she was in her 30s, but through DNA testing services she has been able to connect with a multitude of her half siblings and additionally has membership in an active Facebook Group: The Club Thumb Society, which creates community for individuals with Brachydactyly type D, a genetic trait leading to the appearance of clubbed or “fat” thumbs.

This interview explores unique dynamics and relationships that can emerge from being a product of sperm donation, especially in the context of a shared genetic trait and the formation of a supportive online community.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction:

Can you begin by sharing a bit about your background and how you came to learn about your status as the product of sperm donation?

Could you explain the significance of the "fat thumbs" group and how it came about?

What does family mean to you?

How does the importance of DNA compare to lived socialized experience?

How has your knowledge of shared ancestry and shared DNA affected your relationships?

How does knowledge of not sharing DNA affect your relationships?

How do you feel about the transparency of the process? is that something that you appreciate or wish was done differently?

Genetic Inheritance:

Brachydactyly type D is a unique genetic trait that you and your half-siblings share. How do you perceive this trait, and how has it affected your sense of identity or belonging within the group?

Can you discuss any other genetic traits or characteristics that you and your half-siblings have in common, and how they contribute to your shared identity?

Online Community and Connection:

What role does the "fat thumbs" online group play in your life, and how has it impacted your relationships with your half-siblings?

In what ways does this online community provide a sense of connection, support, or understanding that may be unique to your situation?

Family Dynamics:

How do you define the concept of "family" in the context of your relationship with your half-siblings and the donor, considering the absence of a traditional nuclear family structure?

Have you encountered any challenges or unique dynamics in navigating relationships within this extended family?

Documentation and Medical Information:

Has the availability of medical or genetic documentation been important in your interactions with the online group and in understanding your shared genetic heritage?

How do you handle discussions about health and medical history within the group, and do you see it as a form of documentation of your collective genetic background?

Identity and Ancestry:

Beyond genetics, how do you explore and define your individual and collective identities, including your ancestry and cultural heritage?

Are there any cultural or identity aspects that you share or celebrate within the group?

Personal Growth and Reflection:

How has being a part of this unique community influenced your personal growth and self-discovery?

Are there any insights or lessons you've gained from your experiences that you believe may be valuable to others in similar situations?

Donor and Donor Siblings:

Have you had the opportunity to connect with or learn more about the sperm donor who contributed to your existence?

How do you navigate discussions about the donor and your shared relationships with him within the group?

Advice and Support:

What advice or support would you offer to individuals who are also products of sperm donation and may be seeking connections with their half-siblings or donor siblings?

Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss regarding the "fat thumbs" group and your experiences within it?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Caty Brown.

Conducted over Google Teams, September 2023 by Mary Helen Mack

Caty Brown

There's a whole thumb, called The Club Thumb Society, and it's on Facebook. There's, I should see how many of us there are-- like 3,000 of us from all over the world. And, the theory is actually that it came from Mongolia or that kind of area; because I've met people that actually are in the Chinese culture that find that it's a thing, not of wealth, but it's revered to have fat thumbs. I don't know, to me, it was just somehow went through the family line where we got it. I'm not sure that it follows a I believe it follows a mother's side. But neither of my kids got it. So, I'm curious if any of their kids is gonna get it. But, yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

So, you got it from your mother's?

Caty Brown

So actually, you're sorry, get it from the father's side. Because it's my biological father. He didn't have them, but his son and his granddaughter have them. And that's how I found out who my.... that's what made me realise, confirmed, who my biological half-brother is because he had fat thumbs.

Mary Helen Mack

Well, that actually is my first question. Can you begin by sharing a bit about your background and how you learned about your biological family?

Caty Brown

Okay, looks complicated, but back when I was about 30 years old is when my parents told us that we were all products of anonymous sperm donors. And it was sort of what was happening in the late 50s and 60s, but they just discovered and I've learned more about it, because my biological father---- this is all through obstetrics, they were all OBs. They weren't it was just the time where like, "well, we can artificially inseminate cows in Wisconsin, right? And get a certain gene pool, we can artificially inseminate animals, why can't we do that with humans," as they're realising that it's, you know, it's not the woman that isn't can't get pregnant, it's the man who is sterile, can't get her pregnant. And, so anyway, that's kind of why they were starting to think that this was a possibility. But the way that they did, it was pretty much, you know, the woman would have to....so they were all realizing patients of this doctor, I can't give you this name at the moment, because it's confidential. But so, of my family of my half brothers and sisters, they all had the same OB, which is this doctor. And they would be tracking their cycles, and when they knew they were ovulating, they would call up the doctor and say, "I'm ovulating." They'd say, "Okay, come in at whatever." And you come in, and they would have another doctor donate his sperm. And that's what they used to impregnate you.

Mary Helen Mack

So not sperm donors as we know them today, just the doctors doing....

Caty Brown

Yeah, exactly. So, they didn't really think of it non-ethically, because they were all physicians. They knew each other, it wasn't sort of a random; I'm assuming this is how they were thinking about it, and just saw it as a way as it is giving women the opportunity to be pregnant. Since this, I mean, we've seen Netflix things where there were some doctors that did this have hundreds of children, right? They abused that; they kind of had a god complex. So, there is that side of it. There’re stories like that which are a little crazy. Ours is totally different and so when I went I DNA Ancestry DNA, so I knew about this. So then, long story short, I knew about this. My mom said "Each of you girls have a different, as far as we know, a different biological father," which explained why we all have a lot of characteristics of my mother, but really don't look like we're siblings necessarily where you look at other families and you can definitely tell their siblings.

Mary Helen Mack

When did your mom say this to you?

Caty Brown

We were 30. So, my, my parents were going through a divorce and I think it was the last little punch to my dad because they were never going to tell us and so my Their mom said she got the files from the nurse once the doctor retired, but she burned the notes and I never believed that but apparently, she did. But little beknown to them: they didn't know that Ancestry DNA was going to come out, and we're all gonna figure it out anyway. So, I did that. And that's how I found my first half-brother Jeff He turns out to be the third child of the biological father, who was the doctor.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay So his actual nuclear family.

Caty Brown

Yes, nuclear family; and he's the one with the fat thumbs, so that kind of connected us. And interestingly, I thought, oh, great, you know, I met him, you know, "oh my gosh, you know, do you happen to have a father who was a doctor and Madison at the UW at this time, blah, blah, blah, under this doctor?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Do you have any idea about no knowledge of this?" he said, "actually, I just learned about it, like six months earlier." And his mom had said, "Oh, dear, he only did it like two times," because they got too little checks for like, $25. That's like how much money they got. But she needed the money, she had three kids. So, she doesn't think he was really doing it for the money, per se, he thinks he was doing it because he really felt the value of seeing women give birth and have a family and whatever. But, interestingly enough, the biological father wrote an article about this, that my brother Jeff found, talking about the ethics of it and why it was kept so secret is because: 1. it was in the 60s, 2. Especially in Catholicism it was considered. well, we're all bastard children. And the doctor would be considered adultery.

Mary Helen Mack

Even though it's no fornication, no physical intimacy.

Caty Brown

That's how the Catholic Church would see it. So that's one of the reasons we realised they kept it really secret. And times were just very different. But there were some real legal issues around it back in the day, so that's one of the reasons they kept it so quiet. Anyway, so we found Jeff, and then Jeff told me about his two sisters. And then right after that, we found one more and then they all started popping in because it was right after Christmas time. It was like everyone was getting the test [23andme or some DNA/genealogical equivalent] at Christmas time, and then getting the answers around Easter time, so they started pinging in. And then that summer, one of my sisters actually tested because she was very jealous that I found my family, you know, my biologicals. And she did as well--- she's one as well. So, my middle sister and I are actually whole sisters. My older sister is from a different donor-- and he's, her dad, actually is also a doctor from that same group. Because she looks just like him, I pulled up his obit, and my older sister is a spitting image of this doctor. And his son is a very good friend of my biological father, or, rather, my biological half-brother. So, it looks like this big family, and if you think about it, back in the day those doctors worked really long hours, right. I mean, they're out all the time. And so, the wives kind of had you sort of like army families, the wives kind of had their group of one another and they had picnics together, they kind of raised their kids together. And so, I kind of feel like we're all just one big happy family because we all have half-brothers and real siblings and whatever, all within the same grouping. Wild! But anyway, we've found eight of us now. Three who were the originals, you know, the nuclear family, and five others.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, and those five others includes you and your middle sister?

Caty Brown

There's more. There might be seven. So, there's Diane, Laurie, Randy.... The one we just met Katie, and Ellen. Seven. So, they're 10 all altogether, seven halves, and three, nuclear.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. But then you and your sister are full siblings to each other, which, I mean, that's kind of nice. Was that a surprise? Finding out that you were full siblings? Were you fully expecting that?

Caty Brown

No, because I'm, I'm the fair one of the family. Ellen and I grew up only you know, 13 months apart. So, we were mannerisms are really similar because we kind of were raised like twins, but she has very olive skin. She's very brunette. I am a thicker build, Ellen and Sue are much thinner bills. So, I just... we're all very different. So, I didn't think so. I thought she must have a Greek father or something. But...

Mary Helen Mack

But full siblings.

Caty Brown

Siblings. Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

Could you explain the significance of the fat thumbs and how that sort of group came about or how you found that group?

Caty Brown

Well, it's really just, you know, when you have an anomaly, like you have red hair, right? So, you get it, you know. Attention or pulled aside that you're different in one way. And it was always my thumbs. It was an anomaly. So, it was always called fat thumb. You're teased. You know whenever I see somebody, I always check their hands --like I'm on an airplane I see a fat thumb I always grab their hand and go "look at that! We both have fat thumbs!" because I have never found people growing up that have fat thumbs. No one in my family had fat thumbs. So, I didn't know where they came from. There was a time I thought it was adopted, because how come no one else in the family has fat thumbs? Little did I know that there was

a reason why that was partially true. So, there's a significance in that. So, it's something that bonds people. Like you meet redhead people probably, you know.

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, yeah. Automatically like people a little bit more when they have that weird thing like you have.

Caty Brown

Yeah, that's like we have something in common. So that's what it was

Mary Helen Mack

You said the nuclear family son of your biological father has the thumbs. Do any of the others? or is it not everyone gets it sort of thumbs?

Caty Brown

More special. Not everybody gets it-- the thumbs like that. So, Jeff, this half-brother has some and his daughter has some as well. So that was cool. So, it's, it's… So, flowing down his chain. I'll be curious to see if anyone else gets some. So, I'm not really sure how it how it flows. But usually people that I meet, they'll say, oh, my grandmother had them or someone in their family they can connect to.

Mary Helen Mack

That's pretty cool. I was just looking into it. I think the medical term for it is Brachydactyly type D, it's sort of a unique condition. How do you perceive this trait? And how has it affected your sense of identity and belonging?

Caty Brown

I'm a terrible bowler, because you cannot find a ball that has a hole big enough for your thumb. So, you have to grip the ball from just this. So, and I would say the only thing that's hardest is you can't text with your thumbs. But bowling mostly. Other than that, it doesn't do anything. I mean, it's just a thumb as a thumb. I mean, I wouldn't know any different.

Mary Helen Mack

Does it affect your sense of identity at all? Did it make you feel more connected maybe to this half-brother than you feel like you might have been had you been the only one?

Caty Brown

Yes, it definitely made me feel more connected to him. Because it was an anomaly. And we both kind of know what it's like to be teased growing up. I was very embarrassed of them growing up, I used to just do this all the time: you hide your thumb like a fist. You never would show your thumbs; we'd sit on our hands because people would immediately make fun of you, like "What happened to your thumbs???", you know, like, "did you suck your thumb growing up?" And on the club thumb society thing that were part of, one of the people said that when someone asked him, he said, "Oh, when I was young, I wasn't born with thumb, so they put my big toes on my hand." Well, I thought that was perfect, because that's exactly what they look like is your big toe. So, I know that's a pretty good answer. But yeah, it's a sense of insecurity, because it's something someone teases you about, right?

Mary Helen Mack

Do you have any other genetic traits or characteristics common among you and your half siblings? And how do they contribute to a sense of shared identity?

Caty Brown

One of the very interesting things is everybody is very science minded. I mean, in knowing the careers that everybody went through, we have a Chitogenisist, we have a geophysicist, we have two environmental conservationists, one is a park ranger and the other one studied all the water in Wisconsin, all the lakes and streams. And, and I would say one of the common things with that is the love of nature. And I mean, there's a lot of adventure and travel but all a lot within the within nature. We've got hikers and backpackers and canoers. So, that with a science mind has been really interesting, a common thread. So, when we, a few times, we've gotten together, it's been really interesting to discover some of those things.

Mary Helen Mack

That is interesting that sort of the thing you think of that binds you isn't even something like "Oh, we all have the same colour eyes or something that's very physical," because you would expect career paths to be more influenced by environment, but it seems like everyone has sort of gone into a natural science. So, there's something sort of in the DNA that says, natural sciences and outdoorsy-ness.

Caty Brown

Yeah, the environment is very interesting because we all looked at each other like, you "do my kids look like the grandfather?" We put all our baby pictures together, we put all our high school graduation pictures together, just to see if there's some physical similarities. And there's a little bit with, you know, we were blonde when we were younger, like to have them, their high school pictures look very similar, but it could have just been the times-- you know, how they wore their hair. But in general, none of us really look like me. Some people are really short, some are really tall. I expected us to look a little more alike. But I think the biological family sees traits in each of us back to their father, who's not living, which is interesting. They'll say, "Oh, you have the Eckert nose," or "Oh, you have the Eckert, whatever." But we don't see it because we didn't grow up with it. But they see it, and they see it in our kids too. When we show pictures

of our kids like, "oh, they look like an Eckert." And this was why so I think there are some physical similarities, but I wouldn't know of them because I didn't grow up with that family.

Mary Helen Mack

And so, you're also in the group: the Club Thumb Society. So that is separate from the half siblings. So, what role does that group play in your life? And how has it impacted your life or relationships with both in the group and outside of it?

Caty Brown

It's just something fun. Because we all, you know, when you're teased about something, you realise someone else has it you have that commonality. And we joke about it like someone will say, "Look, I got a manicure." Try finding a good manicure for fat thumbs. I mean, you go into a manicure, and they go.... you know what they're talking about, you know what I'm talking about, "I have a chick with a fat thumb and I can't put a tip on." So, whenever we get some manicure, it's funny. Usually, a picture that's on there is a when a girl has just gotten a really cute manicure, and then it's her thumb... So, we just laugh about it. It's just a common thing. But I don't know those people personally. I don't reach out to them other than just, you know, "welcome to the club and love your thumb." And there are jokes about bowling. I think that's the one thing everybody struggled with growing up. It's more just a side thing.

Mary Helen Mack

So, does it impact your relationship with yourself in any way, like feeling like a bit more accepting? I know a lot of people when they're teased or something as a kid, you either learn to embrace it, or it's still an insecurity growing up, has the community helped that relationship? Or were you already accepting?

Caty Brown

I think I'm just; it just is who I am. It's just, I am who I am. But as a child, it's a little hard, you know, people make fun of you. But you know, it's a pretty minor thing, versus someone who may have had, you know, a real physical disability. I mean, fat thumbs are really no big deal. So, no, it doesn't impact me at all today.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. Moving on to the next section, what does family mean to you?

Caty Brown

That's a big question. Families, everything family is .... it’s kind of identity, who you identify as, you know; you're part of this clan, this group. This is how we live. I mean, everyone has sort of social parameters and traditions and ways in which you interrelate. That's, I think, very specific to a family. So, for me, it's very important: that is the core of who you are.

Mary Helen Mack

How do you define the concept of family in the context of your relationship with your half siblings and the now deceased sperm donor father and in consideration of the lack of nuclear structure of the half siblings? How do you define family in that context? Do you refer to them as siblings?

Caty Brown

It definitely... like my older sister hasn't really connected with her half siblings, she doesn't really understand why we, why Ellen and I would even want to, you know, get together with these other half siblings. She's "you don't even know them. Why...once you know who they are why do you really care to get to know them?" And it's because you have a commonality, right? So, there is a sense of family. But I think it's only been because it's been nurtured by the fact that the nuclear family were very welcoming, interested in learning about us, interested to find out about us. And obviously, it's very rare for groups like this to even acknowledge us, right? Most would be like, oh, I don't want to hear about it. You know, what do you want from our family, blah, blah, blah. But we've all wanted to get to know each other. And I think that's because we have these interesting commonalities, especially for the guys, because each of the guys-- three of them -- never had brothers. So, they all of a sudden have brothers. And it's been really cute how they have really tried to work on finding that relationship somehow, because it's sort of like a kindred spirit. Like, "oh, I now have a brother". It doesn't affect my nuclear family. That's very, very different. I mean, my family I grew up with is, obviously, my family. My father is obviously my father, my mother's obviously my mother. But it is really interesting to have this other side. Family, and just, it's just kind of going "there's no pressure, just going along," like how is it going to evolve? Plus, there's so many of them. I mean, it's like eight people. 10 people! That's hard to wrap... you know, spend a lot of energy on that when I have my own family and friends,

Mary Helen Mack

Especially since you not only have your nuclear family where you are the child of that nuclear family. But now, you additionally have your nuclear family where you are having your own kids, and you were the head of even that somewhat separate family.

Caty Brown

Yeah. And now I have this other group, like just trying to remember birthdays. It's just overwhelming. Like, I don't know how people do that with really huge families.

Mary Helen Mack

I have a book, and I write it down. It's the only way to remember everyone

Caty Brown

We have someone pays attention, but it's sort of interesting that we're all wanting to get to know each other. But I think it's very rare. And we've just been super fortunate.

Mary Helen Mack

I think a little bit of that could be the circumstances. Because these half siblings weren't the result of anything that is openly shameful. I mean, back then, as you said, there was the article about how it's looked down upon. But now, a lot of people use a sperm donor, it's a very open thing that many people do. And it wasn't the result of anything like an affair that it's like, "people can't talk about that." So, because it is the "Oh, yeah, it was a sperm donor, and there was no contact." Do you think that sort of lent to what has made it a little bit easier?

Caty Brown

Absolutely. There are stories. We just have this story of the parents not telling us until either there was a divorce or never intended to tell us or it was a secret in their own families. All of them. So, we have this that commonality. And growing up knowing we were a little bit different. Why don't we fit in with our family? Why don't we look like so and so. So, we have all of those commonalities. See, yeah, very much. So that's what binds us are those things

Mary Helen Mack

That could be a generational thing as well. The world has sort of moved on. Nowadays if you say, "Oh, it's a product of a sperm donor." No one even really thinks twice about that. They go "Oh, yeah, that's just a thing that sometimes happens. Sometimes you need to get a donor."

Caty Brown

Which is funny, because I've made a big deal about it. I, you know, my So, dad didn't, we didn't. All of us knew. We found out who the sperm donor was, before my dad passed. And because this was very sensitive to my dad, we kept it hush hush, never talked about it and didn't tell our kids. And then my dad passed. And so, then we're like, "Okay, it's time to tell you that Grandpa isn't really your grandpa biologically but now we do know who it is." And the reaction was like, "Yeah, okay, fine. Why, and whatever." And it was so funny. It was such a big deal to us. Right? Like, keeping it a secret this whole time and making sure you didn't slip out. And both my kids, because I gave them a DNA test, so you might want to see that we really aren't Irish at all. We're German, Irish surnames but No Irish in us at all. It's all German, we're Eastern European. And they're like, "Okay, whatever, never took the test." And so, and I think you're right, because it's been it's a very common thing now and but the circumstance of it was very different back then. I mean, that was a big deal. And the other thing, the bigger thing, they kept it a secret because you never blamed the man for the woman not getting pregnant. That just wasn't done. So, it was the woman's fault she couldn't get pregnant. And then, when they realised it was really the sperm count on the man, then that was a societal, you know, "Thing."

Mary Helen Mack

Seems like everyone's always blaming the woman until the evidence comes out, like some kings being like, "Why can't any of my wives produce a male heir for me? Can't be me." Even though we know that the gender comes from the father? And how do you feel about telling your kids? Do you feel that that was a responsibility to let them know where their genetics came from? Because there are things like genetically inherited diseases and things to be on the lookout for, especially with testing now that we can do that. Do you think it's necessary to keep things more transparent? In that way, even if you say, "this is your family, (as far as nuclear family) were the love and the raising is, but also you have to be aware of the biological?"

Caty Brown

Absolutely. One of the reasons I wanted to find out who my biological father was: I wanted to know, and those were my first questions. Damn, I really just want to know what's in the family gene pool that I should be worried about? You know, is there Alzheimer's? Heart issues? Is there, you know, some sort of disease that I need to be aware of? And that's really why one of the main reasons I wanted to connect, so yes, for that reason, I think it's important to tell them and to I think, just in our world, now, we just are more transparent. You know, I just think that that's just the nature of our job is, as we've gotten, as time has gone on, we've just become more transparent. There's no reason for it not to be.

Mary Helen Mack

Again, that could be societal shift: a lot of the shame has now just become something that people have agreed --That's not something to be ashamed of.

Caty Brown

Exactly, exactly. It's a big deal. But that, but it makes you understand why and when you hear over and over why they had to keep it so secret, and their neighbours or friends didn't know; their families didn't know. I mean, imagine having to keep that secret.

Mary Helen Mack

I don't think I could keep that big.

Caty Brown

Well, my mom even had to-- she had it. So, it took them a long time to have my first sister. And then they realised that's why they weren't getting pregnant. So, then they did this. And it still took a while to have Ellen--three more years. But my mom remembers having to go in and so she couldn't have someone watch Sue. So, she's going in there with Sue, who was one and a half, into the exam room, you know, getting inseminated with me. But she couldn't tell anybody. Yep. Lonely.

Mary Helen Mack

Now, my husband's sister is currently pregnant. When she called to tell us the first question we had was, "Who is the father?" because she's not seeing anyone and then "oh, no, I'm having this kid on my own." And we're "Oh, okay." She was just very upfront about it, seems like normal stuff. As soon as she said, "Oh, I made this decision on my own." She just did it.

Caty Brown

I know. It's really interesting. And it's interesting that-- what I find really interesting-- like Katherine Bagwell, so her bio-Dad... What's curious, but also concerning to me, is how many times they can donate? So, I think she... I think her child is one of 14 or something. I don't know what the number is. But I think that's a lot of kids. Right? That is a lot. I think there should be some sort of social responsibility, because they're all in the Seattle/Portland area. Right? And the chances of connecting are pretty high. I mean, you could happen across... Same with us. We were all in the Madison area. And that was the other thing: we're, you know, talking about, you know, we grew up we went to high schools across town; the nuclear family went to high school just across town. Jeff was a bartender in a bar that my sister and I used to go to, (before we were of age...) but, you know, you only had to be 18 to drink. So, he's like, "I was probably the bartender there. And wouldn't it have been really weird if I had like asked one of you out on a date?" If I didn't know and I'm like, I know it would have been so weird. I mean, our paths have crossed in the weirdest ways. That happens... They do actually have something to mitigate that in small communities, like in Iceland, for example, because it's such an insular community. Actually an "anti-incest" app you can get on your phone. It's because they keep such careful genealogical records. Everyone has their family tree on their phone, and they actually have this app ...called Bump? and you can touch phones, and it tells you how closely related you are. So, like, if you're about to hook up with someone, you just touch phones, and it'll be like, "are you cousins?" No, just kind of creepy. No.

Mary Helen Mack

And that just leads to the question of a lot of my friends. The question is usually, well, how close does it have to be before you shut it down?

Caty Brown

Exactly!

Mary Helen Mack

Because if someone says, "Oh, you're seventh or eighth cousins," that's so far away. But if you say first cousins, second cousins, we're getting too close.

Caty Brown

I know, I know. So, crazy.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, so how's the availability of medical or genetic documentation been important with your interactions? With both your family, your online group? And with the new extended family? How has this shifted your understanding of your genetic heritage? You had mentioned before that you found out you're not Irish at all, as you thought. Were you very connected to your Irish heritage? Or was it just something sort of interesting?

Caty Brown

No, it definitely is your identity. Because I grew up, you know, you look at your family name, gotten my family name back to County Cork, and Dave's [Caty's Husband's] family back to County Cork like "Oh, we could be related?" Well, now I'm not because I'm not really Coleman. And then I'm East German. And what's really cool, I don't know if you have done Ancestry DNA, but when you go on, they show you the maps of So, where people were, like you can see when the Eastern Germans it was famine, and what year that was, what decade and where they moved. And when they came over, and my group of people came over, they went to Pennsylvania, then they went to northern Wisconsin, and then they all filtered into Wisconsin. So, it's really interesting to see this family line, you can actually watch where the outline is still where the bulk of the live is still in the Midwest. Just fascinating. Yeah, it's crazy. It's like okay, so why have blue eyes? Ellen doesn't have blue eyes. And that just comes from you know... Then you've got my mom, you know, in her side of the family, you know, blending in but no, it's really fascinating to see why people came to this country and where are you really from. And for a while there, I was, like, 15% Irish and like, okay, that could make sense, comes from my mom. My mom has Scandinavian, English, and Irish in her. She's got a she's quite a mixture. But this other line is very German. And it's Eastern. It's Croatian, Eastern European. It's fascinating. And then it got down to like now know... I can't even find any traces of Irish. But the funny part is, so Ellen's, and then the kids since Dave's Irish. So, we've already told our kids, you're very Irish. Because Dave's mom is full Irish. There was no question but now it's like "no, now you're like, a quarter German." So just slightly scratch that. But Alan's son, and daughter, he has a big Irish tattoo. So, he has some big Irish tattoo and same with the daughter, put a big, like a tramp stamp. It's horrible. I know she's doing a clover... The clover! and I'm like, "oh gosh, who's going to tell her that she's really not Irish at all." So, joke's on them, but I'm just like, "oh, that's gonna be a rough one." But no, it makes me look at things differently when I'm travelling and thinking I'm not Irish at all. This is really where I came from. So, I totally play into it.

Mary Helen Mack

Do you ever think you'll go visit that part of Germany where you know the family is from?

Caty Brown

Sure, it would have an interest if I'm there to try and track down where they really came from. You know, heredity is exciting. It's fun. But some people don't care about it at all. They're like, "No, I just am who I am."

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I've not done any of the Ancestry online things, but I am a member of the DAR, so I have been through many of my family's documents- up through grandma Barbie's whole line, I think.

Caty Brown

Where do you guys all come from?

Mary Helen Mack

Grandma Barbie traces back to the Mayflower.

Caty Brown

Oh my gosh.

Mary Helen Mack

Then one of then a couple of generations after that Revolutionary War, and then just a very slow migration West, sort of generation by generation, until we all ended up in Oregon.

Caty Brown

Wow.

Mary Helen Mack

And then I know that grandad Don's parents were English, like for from England. He was, I think, first generation to be born here. His parents had emigrated. And then I think one of granddad Don's brothers, no one of his uncles, just moved back to England, the whole family come over and then one of the brothers said, "Actually, no," and went back. And then I think my dad side is German. But that's where I would need to actually get some kind of ancestry looked at, because the only reason I have all the documents is because Grandad Don was really, really into genealogy. And he kept all the documents and then was like, "Oh, well, now I'm done with my family. I'm gonna do my wife's family" and did the whole thing. My dad's family, I don't believe was ever into such things, although I do know my dad's mom is Irish, because she remembered her parents coming over. And we offered to take her to Ireland one year saying, "Do you want to see where you're from?" And she said, "Oh, no, half my family died trying to escape that country. Why on earth would I want to go back?"

Caty Brown

Oh, well, the interesting if you ever do your ancestry, it's just it's you know, we're all related, at the end of the day, right?

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, yeah. What do they say? If you go back 30-something generations... like, you have your parents, and you've got two, you've got grandparents, four, and if you keep expanding that up about 30 generations, the number that you get exceeds the population of the earth at that time. Which means there must be some interweaving or interbreeding.

Caty Brown

No kidding, right? Especially, right, these small communities. I mean, if you were Norwegian, or from Iceland, even anywhere people have really travelled

Mary Helen Mack

I bring up Iceland just because it's much easier to be insulated when you're an island.

Caty Brown

Exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

At least Norway is a little bit easier to get to a different adjacent country.

Caty Brown

Well, then you have all the families-- and forget about artificial insemination; all the affairs and this and that and things, how many different places? No family is pure right? So, it's just curious, like, "Oh, how did that one get stuck in there?" And you know, why is there you know, African American in with the Polynesian and everything, and anyway, it's fascinating.

Mary Helen Mack

It is. So, we're all somewhat connected, not somewhat connected, even more than somewhat in many cases. Next question: How do you handle discussions about health and medical history within any of your family groups? And do you see it as a form of documentation, your genetic background?

Caty Brown

I think mental health, I think every family has it, in different ways. And I mean, thankfully, we're in a time now where you can talk about it. But surely, when I was younger, I know my mom was going through some stuff. I know Dave's mom was very much going through stuff. And it wasn't talked about. So, it's just been like the last, I think, 20 years that it's now becoming more accepted. So, I think it is important. I think one of the things, reasons it's important, I think, is people your age, I am finding that people are wondering whether or not they should have children together, knowing how much each has struggled, knowing "do we want to pass this down?" You know, and I think that's a discussion I think young people are having now. So, it's very important to talk about it, I think. And it would, it's good to be aware of when you do have children; this is something to look out for and not be oblivious to.

Mary Helen Mack

Gene therapy and screening is sort of becoming better and better every year, with the ability to screen for certain things, even an embryo the ability to screen parents and to have those informed decisions, especially because there are so many genetically inherited things. I'm just curious, do you feel like there's a responsibility to let your kids know if there is something that maybe is going on with the family. Do you feel like there's an obligation to let your children know of any potential problems?

Caty Brown

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I think so. It's, it's just the same as saying, you know, there's leukemia in the family and breast cancer. You know, it's something you need to screen for, be aware of. I don't think mental health is any different.

Mary Helen Mack

So, there's this, this case study in a medical law textbook I read recently, and, this isn't one of the interview guide questions, I'm just sort of interested to hear your take on this, is it had a case study of a real case that happened where a man was diagnosed with this very serious... it was a degenerative genetic condition. He didn't want his family worrying about him, so he asked his doctor not to tell any members of his family and said, "I don't really plan on telling them, and I don't want you to tell them." And the doctor, of course, doctor, patient confidentiality can't tell the kids. The problem is, is that this genetic condition is one of those that's almost guaranteed to be with the kids, but they can test for it. And it's much better to be aware of it early so you can start treatment as early as possible, because it is generative. It was dementia adjacent. Do you feel like in that situation, there is an obligation to let the kids know, even though it's somewhat violating the confidentiality. Because, obviously, the kids would want to know, "why do you think I have this genetic condition?" And they'd even be able to Google the condition, it says, "Oh, yes, it's directly genetically inherited?" Would it be sort of on the doctor to let the kids know you should get tested? Or is that a violation of the dad's wishes?

Caty Brown

That's tough, because they're not adopted. I don't know what their ethical vow is. But it is.... I would I would maybe pose it this way is "there's a possibility; you have the choice to be tested." It's kind of like

Alzheimer's. Like, in our family, like Dave's, family, it's very prevalent. And so, we've been talking about it with the brothers, like, you know, do you want to be tested? And none of them want to be tested? And like, why not? I mean, inevitably, if you're gonna get it, you're gonna get it. But wouldn't you like to know now? So, you can do some planning in the family? Like, how do you want us to be treating you, let's make some plans. Let's change your diet, let's do something. I mean, it concerns me that they don't want to know, and I get it, they're scared. But as a caretaker, I certainly want to know what my life plan is going to be. And not all of a sudden. So, for the doctor, the question is, which is the doctor liable? Well, that's just Unfortunately, his ethics vow, but I think he maybe could work or he she could work around the fact saying, "there's a test you can take this is, this could be a possibility in your family. If you're interested, take a test, we at least giving the people that the opportunity to have the knowledge and make a choice for themselves." And again, still are breaking your vow? So, it's a tricky question. I would ask a doctor that question, because that's, they're the ones that know what that means.

Mary Helen Mack

Right? I read it in a medical case law book. So, they actually said, here are the rules as far as what the UK court would decide. And it was, if the doctor says anything to the kids, he is liable for breach of confidentiality, and is able to be sued if the dad chooses to do that. But I just thought it was an interesting sort of question from the standpoint of DNA, and any potential problems. Because there's a possibility of passing down the thumbs. But that's just thumbs, it's not detrimental in any way. But if it had been something more like Alzheimer's, or something, that was going to be a more detrimental thing, do you feel like there's a responsibility to let everyone know? Even if that means exposing that you have it?

Caty Brown

I think there is. But I understand why a doctor can't maybe what a doctor could do is strongly encourage the person to at least you know, tell your you, family to have a test or something, you know, not that they had without or know how they would do it. But yeah, maybe that's all they could do. But I don't know you're right. That would be a very typical ethical decision as a doctor, you have to stand by and just watch it happen and affect a family one at a time.

Mary Helen Mack

So, coming off of that topic and returning to this. How has being a part of this community of both the nuclear family, and now the extended doner family, and the thumbs, affected your personal growth and sense of self identity?

Caty Brown

Um, it's a good question. I don't think it's really affected. Any more than just been added? It's added quality to my life and knowing that I have this other group of people that care about me. It's sort of, you know, another support system, it's a bigger, widening to my village, so to speak. And that's a wonderful thing. So, in that sense, it's enhanced my life. I don't think it's changed my confidence level or how I live my life or anything like that. But it definitely has added some construct to my family, my family's gotten bigger. And

that's a lovely thing. And there are people that text me and check in on me my love my I have a brother now, he calls me Little Sis, I mean, how can you not think that's wonderful? And checks in on me make sure I'm doing okay. And you know, that's amazing. So, in that sense, it's just, it's just enhanced my life.

Mary Helen Mack

That's really good. Are there any insights or lessons you've gained from this experience that you believe might be valuable to others in a similar situation? And I'd also be interested to know how you feel about sort of the transparency of this knowing that it was something that wasn't ever supposed to come out wasn't ever planned, like it was going to be announced in any way?

Caty Brown

Um, okay. What was the first?

Mary Helen Mack

Are there any insights or lessons you've gained from the entire experience that you believe might be valuable to others, like, if you were to say, this is something I learned that I think I should pass on?

Caty Brown

Well, I think, to people that were very in my position where you're searching for a biological, I think I would also still get the advice of just tread lightly. A lot of people find out that, the donors, family don't want anything to do with you. And they may not even be aware of it. So, you're now telling them something that happened. And you've opened up a chapter in their world that was not intended to be there. And they didn't ask for it, right? Those kids ask them, the nuclear family didn't ask to have eight and seven more siblings. And it could be very embarrassing to them, or whatever. So, to tread lightly, would be my advice. The other is, some of the people that we've found, like, we just found one more. And actually, she went to high school with my sister and I, and she's a half-sister, like, "Oh, my God, that's a little too close to home." But she's having a hard time figuring it out and being cheap, because it's all new information to her. So, at first, she thought her mother had had an affair. And then how come she's the only sibling that is, is not biological, because the other two of her siblings were. So, this was sort of like, luckily, they got those two, but not this one. So not everybody's ready to So, wrap their arms around it. Some people don't really want that information. So, you just have to be really careful when you're on ancestry, you get a connection, be careful what you're walking into, because not everybody is curious. Not everybody wants the information. So, you just have to really careful. And, and the exposure of its transparency has been fun. Because we've been talking about this, we need to go on Dr. Phil, because this is amazing of how we found it, and how we're all the same and how we keep finding another and how we all like each other. And we've talked about-- there's a gal who writes books, who wants to write a short story about him [the doner father] like, oh, no, each chapter is another sibling. And then we're going to have connections, passed through each other's lives. And we're going to embellish a little bit. We're kind of having fun with the thought that it's going to be a miniseries. So might be miniseries someday. For the drama.

Mary Helen Mack

Do it for the drama!

Caty Brown

Because you know, our lives have passed and crossed and through schools or trips, or it's like, "oh, my gosh, I could have... what if I had known you then" but it's true. Not everybody's into it. Like my older sister. Case in point. We know who her half-brother is. He's best friend of my half-brother. But he doesn't really want to he doesn't really want to do this. He's like, "I don't really know." Okay, now I know that my dad did this, but I really don't want to have a relationship with however many half siblings I have. It's not what I want. And that's fine. I get it. We're just a rare case. And we wouldn't be in this situation if the biological siblings and nuclear family didn't wrap their arms around us. Jeff could easily have said, "Okay, fine. I told you what you needed to know. And goodbye," and it's totally what I expected. Next day, he's calling me back again. "Hey, how you doing?" Oh, I'm like, "Okay," this is where I didn't expect a relationship here. I just wanted my information. And I'm good. So, it's just been very odd. Everybody's a different story, but we also get it had doors slammed in our faces and gotten no information.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm just thinking, do you feel like maybe your oldest sister or any of the people could have coped a little bit better. Had there been even more transparency, for instance if it had been something that they found out much earlier on? I just had an interview with my friend Aaron, he's known that he's adopted, full transparency his entire life. He used to introduce himself as the adopted kid when we were three. He is all for: everything would be much better if from the get go, everyone knew exactly what was going on, there'd be so much more acceptance. Do you feel like more transparency would have affected this, because 30 years is quite late in life to find out. Usually, your whole sense of identity sort of forms in your teens and your early 20s. And to have the foundations of who you think you are rocked in that way. It's a bit more jarring than if you were a little kid having always known it.

Caty Brown

You now are being transparent with your own kids about it. And everyone is just much more accepting of it in general, because it is so much less stigmatised. Yeah, it's kind of like it puts shame that doesn't need to be there. Right, you know, getting being adopted as there's no stigma to being adopted. But if we keep it a secret, now there is. So yes, it would have been nice to know all along. I might have, I think, there my middle sister always felt like she didn't fit in and the family might have helped her because she just felt like her personality didn't fit in, always felt a little it.... could have been the middle child syndrome. I don't know. But she's always felt a little off and not quite like she belongs. I always felt weird. Like, why don't we look like that family where all the siblings look identical? Like, why don't we look that way? And I raised a lot of questions. Nothing that was horribly detrimental to my growing up. But you're right, I think transparency is always good, but definitely for where we are. It just wasn't going to happen. It just, you know, that's just how the times were, they just learned to never tell people. Everybody's got a something,

you know, tell me something interesting about you. Well, you know, and I also you don't want to create a stigma to my real father, who raised me as his own, for all intents and purposes, but right, you don't want them, the biological parent, to feel like something's wrong with them, and they're not good enough. I think there's kind of that psyche that goes on. So, because, can you imagine you have the child but your husband isn't even related, but they raised them. I mean, it doesn't make any difference. He's always my father, but you know, you might be feeling that

Mary Helen Mack

To me fathers are the people that love and take care of you. They're not the person that donated their DNA to you so to speak.

Caty Brown

Exactly, exactly. That's exactly the point. So, I think I'm sure there's a stigma there especially back in the day, in the 60s, but probably not anymore because people are doing this all the time. And I think if you would ask someone like a Katherine Bagwell who did get a donor a donor, I think she will tell her son when he's ready to understand I mean, it makes perfect sense.

Mary Helen Mack

Right? Yeah. All right. On the last few questions, how does the importance of DNA compared to lived social experience? Lived experience being more like the nuclear family you grew up with? Not the genetically related side we touched on.

Caty Brown

I'm trying to figure out how to answer this question. You know, you are DNA and certainly you are who you are and you're the quirks you have and you have the gifts that you have-- like you're musical or you're scientific or whatever it is-- pretty much your So, genetic makeup. That's not so much your socialisation. But it is interesting that even though you were raised, it goes back to even though you're raised in the same family, you're very different people too, right? And you may have all the same genetic DNA. So how is it any different that way? Like, you know, families have every socialization child is the same makeup of the same two parents, but they are all entirely different people and race in the same family. So, what's up about that?

Mary Helen Mack

Sometimes twins raised in the same family at the exact same time, side by side and still end up very different.

Caty Brown

Twins separated at birth, and then and raised in different countries are exactly the same.

Mary Helen Mack

We know very little about the ins and outs of DNA....

Caty Brown

The nature versus nurture question. I think we are who we are based on our DNA. And I think that this the social piece plays into that, right? You might swatch part of me or nurture a part of me, but I still am identity of who I am I so I think the DNA at the end of the day, gives first place.

Mary Helen Mack

But in relation to families, would you consider the socialisation or the social aspect of it more important in the context of your dad that raised you? Is more it's absolutely more your dad than the dad of the DNA?

Caty Brown

Right? Oh, absolutely. The family, the nuclear family that this social structure is far more important, because that's who you emotionally bond to. Right? And that's who we are. So, I think as emotional creatures, that is my identity. It is the family. My identity is not with the DNA. That makes sense.

Mary Helen Mack

And last question, do you have any further thoughts on anything we've talked about? And again, if you think of something at a later time after the interview, just send me an email.

Caty Brown

Nope. Done. And can't wait to read your paper and see how this is all getting put together. But they're interesting questions

Mary Helen Mack

Thank you so much

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER TASCHIOGLOU

Alexander Taschioglou, 18M, is a transman who has just begun attending University and is underway with his transition journey.

This interview provides a personal narrative that illustrates how the human body can be considered a document, particularly in the context of gender identity, and how documentation can have profound effects on an individual's life and self-perception. This personal perspective enriches the paper's exploration of the

broader themes related to the human body as a document and the impact of documents on human experiences.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction:

Can you please start by telling me a bit about yourself and your journey so far, particularly your experiences related to your gender identity?

Understanding Documents:

In the context of our discussion about the human body as a document, how would you define a "document" from your perspective?

Can you think of any examples where your body or aspects of your identity have functioned as a document in your life?

Gender Identity and Documentation:

Generally, how does documentation impact your life?

How has your gender identity been documented or represented in official documents (e.g., ID cards, driver's license, university records), and how has this affected your experiences?

Have you encountered challenges or opportunities in the documentation of your gender transition, both in academic and non-academic contexts?

Do you feel like you are more impacted by paperwork than other people / students in your position (class/age/stage of life)? In your experience, do you feel you have to complete for documents than the “average” student?

Does paperwork and documentation make it more challenging to live as your authentic self?

Representation and Self-Expression:

What does bodily autonomy mean to you?

What does it mean to be able to “edit” your body?

What is an edit you have made to your body and how has it impacted you?

How do you use clothing, hairstyles, or other forms of self-expression to convey your gender identity, and how do you perceive these as documents or messages to others?

Have you encountered any instances where your physical appearance or style of self-expression has been misinterpreted or misunderstood?

Are there any changes you made that surprised you by how much they affected you? Or how little?

What alterations have you done?

Are there any unexpected (not “stereotypically” trans) alterations that have impacted you?

How have these alterations affected you? Physically? Mentally? Emotionally?

Are there any alterations that you would like to do that you have not yet done? What restricts you from pursuing these?

How do you feel about restrictions (if any)?

What alteration have you undergone that has meant the most to you?

Do you believe that alteration of your external appearance means more as a form of self-validation (how you feel about you even if you were alone in a room with no mirrors or outside interaction) or as signal to others?

Do you have aesthetic inspirations? Do you have a specific person/ type/ aesthetic/ ideal that you are trying to look like or do you feel like your direction evolves more organically? Do alterations come in pieces (with the goal evolving as time progresses) or as part of a determined path toward a more well-defined goal?

University Experience:

As a student, have you encountered situations where your identity documentation (e.g., name, gender) has been important or relevant in your university experience?

Are there ways in which the university could improve its support for students like you in terms of documentation and representation?

Privacy and Consent:

How do you feel about the use of personal information, such as gender identity, in university records and systems? Do you have concerns about privacy or consent in this regard?

Future Outlook:

Looking ahead, do you anticipate any changes or challenges related to documentation and representation as you progress through university and into your career?

Personal Empowerment:

In what ways do you feel empowered or disempowered by the documentation and representation of your gender identity? Are there areas where you would like to see more agency or control?

Advice and Recommendations:

Based on your experiences, do you have any advice or recommendations for educational institutions, libraries, or information professionals on how they can better understand and support individuals like you in terms of documentation and representation?

Closing Remarks:

Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss regarding the topic of the human body as a document and your personal experiences with it?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Alexander Taschioglou

Conducted over Google Teams, September 2023 by Mary Helen Mack

Alexander Taschioglou

I have a random I guess, request. This doesn't really matter, but don't give my name.... could you use the full Alexander not just Alex? Because I've kind of been....

Mary Helen Mack

Alexander. So, do you prefer now to go by Alexander? Like fully?[130] Or I also saw that you changed your Instagram to Xander. Is that a name that we are going with?

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, here's okay.... So, the reason: "Alexander" encompasses, like, a lot of things, like "Alex" has been from day one, so like, oh, going off to college, new things, reinvent, blah, blah, blah. Let's try something new. So, for college, I'm going by Xander and that's been great. Everyone who knew me before calls me Alex, and that's great too. I don't care. If I'm just like, in a document.... I just like the way... I like the whole, but I don't care what you call me. Call me whatever you want, like in conversation, if that makes sense. So, I'm assuming you're gonna be used to Alex. So that's fun.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah. I mean, I also married an Alex. So, I'm aware of all the permutations. I personally love the name Xander. He, husband Alex, hates it, so I can't use it on him.

Alexander Taschioglou

Then if you want to use that, then feel free to differentiate. I'm totally in.

[130] Note: As part of the transition, Alexander has changed his name from Alexandria (deadname) to Alexander, having gone by the unisex nickname Alex for all conscious memory. Although still going by Alex in conversation, in print will be referred to as the full Alexander

Mary Helen Mack

Alright. But I will use the full Alexander in writing. And hopefully, all will go well, we'll get this paper written.

Alexander Taschioglou

Thanks for including me, by the way, it seems a really cool project.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I'm, I've been thinking about this for a long time, I'm still hopeful that someday, I will do a PhD on this. But I think it's quite interesting as well, like, ever since I heard about document theory, been very interested. Document theory. In the library sciences, it's the idea that anything can be a document. So, in brief, it's like, okay, so a library is a building that's full of documents, and the documents are books, right. And a museum is like a library, except that all the books are stuff, not books. You know, like in the British Museum, it's a bunch of stolen stuff. And we just put a plaque on it. Yeah, but you can have all sorts of museums, and like an art museum is just a library, but with paintings instead of books.

Alexander Taschioglou

It's like a music shop. Or like documents in a way.

Mary Helen Mack

Yep. And then a zoo. Zoo is like a library, except that the documents are animals. So, from there, we can go like, okay, that means documents can be living. And human zoos used to be a thing. And so, we can just kind of go with that. And then you think, "Okay, well then what makes a document a document," because a stone is not a document until a geologist comes and picks it up and says, "Hey, this is a pretty cool stone" and walks it across the street to the museum and puts it in a glass case with a little label and says that's important now. Or my favourite one is the tea pots at the British History Museum. So, British History Museum has these tea pots that you have to make tea with every single day, or else they'll dry out. So, you have to make tea on these, like 1000-year-old Chinese tea pots on you have to use the same tea all the time, which means that they actually spend hundreds of thousands of pounds a year on this freaking tea, just so that they can make it in these tea pots so that the tea pots will be okay. And that they can keep using the tea pots. Okay? Well, two floors down there are other tea pots, which also are used to make tea every day, except that those tea pots are lent out to patrons, because it's the cafe! So, what makes one of those tea pots a document as far as it has value in the museum, but it's still being used to make tea? And then the one that's like two floors down? Is it just age? At what age does the tea pot become valuable? Because they're doing the same thing. They're the same item being used for the same purpose. They make a pot of tea

Alexander Taschioglou

This is true. For the questions that asked about documentation, are we using this really, really broad idea of document? Because that might change how I answer but I might not be able to grasp it completely the way I normally would. I'll try.

Mary Helen Mack

It's more how you think of documentation. As far as the questions I'll ask, it's more stuff like your passport and your driver's license and like things that sort of come to mind immediately when you think of documents-- or any forms you filled out to enter university. I don't know, medical records or just any kind of like, basically bits of paper that you have to produce for moving forward in life in various ways.

Alexander Taschioglou

Electronic?

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, electronic documents as well, which is also what gets tricky when you start talking about documents, like, is it actually written? Because is a web page document? You could print it out?

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, but like, I guess for the sake of what you're talking about, like with forms and stuff? Yeah. We're like, well, letters of.....

Mary Helen Mack

letters of recommendation are a form of documentation.

Alexander Taschioglou

Noted, but I meant like the... you write the letter to get in? Like, what?

Mary Helen Mack

Like an essay? The entrance essays?

Alexander Taschioglou

entrances? Yeah. Those are digital. And those are like, you got to fill them out to go to college. But that's not really about who you are, like, how much money did your parents make last year? Like, what is your gender? And you know, those? Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

I remember I once got a piece of my college applications. There was a whole page on "tell us about your family members that have already been to this university." And I was like, "Oh.... I'm not getting into this university."

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, whole page too.

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, and one more thing about that might be relevant to something we come up is: I want to introduce the idea of the Ship of Theseus, which is a thought experiment.

Alexander Taschioglou

I got this last night.

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, really? Okay. So, you're familiar, they used it in Wanda Vision, if you've seen it. They did actually, I think, a pretty good job of explaining it in that, which is, just so you're familiar with it, It's the idea that the ship, when is it not the ship?

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, I heard it version in a lesson that I hadn't heard before, where it's like, you know, you disassemble it, you put all the new parts, you know, to steal the ship, but also use the old parts and you erect another ship? Is that ship?

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah. Is that ship the ship?

Alexander Taschioglou

So, I didn't know about part. So, I don't know. I've heard different answers. I think the first one is still the ship, if it has the same intention and like purpose, or whatever, what the second one may be, could be also the same material. But I feel like it depends on what you call it. Because the material didn't have any, like value or anything. It's all signed by people. It's not a creature in of itself. So, I can be like I am this thing, it is what we call it the thing. So, we kind of decide that.

Mary Helen Mack

So, I'm expanding that metaphor in this paper, because in about 80 days, you will have turned over more than two thirds of your cells in your body. The average lifespan of a cell in your body for all the cells is about seven years, seven to ten. Some cells never replicate, but they're an extreme minority of all the cells that make up your body. So, if we think of humans as the Ship of Theseus, that is also a consideration that I am bringing up in this paper, if you would like to think about that. And I usually give the big example of like, you are different now than you were as a child, everyone is different than they were when they were first born. And that is the most obvious distinction. But then there are also like, big events and big changes that like are more obvious. That can be something like chopping off all your hair, getting a massive tattoo. I mean, you could spray paint yourself orange and then start ranting about building a wall

Alexander Taschioglou

(Muffled Laughter)

Mary Helen Mack

(Muffled Laughter)

Alexander Taschioglou

Have you seen all the mug shots?

Mary Helen Mack

I'm so proud to be an American.

Alexander Taschioglou

(More Laughter)

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, so. So that's also something that is brought up in all of this research. To think about that there. You're basically always the idea is that you're always changing like the Ship of Theseus, but you're being changed so minusculey that it's not noticed. So do you consider yourself a different person, but there's also like, these sorts of like, big events that are more impactful, and that just because it's like more obvious to other people. You don't notice a kid growing day by day. So those are sort of the two general concepts that I am introducing in this paper. So that you know, generally, those things to consider and now we can go through the questions. Alright, I have been talking a lot. Again, we'll just go through the questions if that's okay. And feel free to go on tangents or whatever you feel like,

Alexander Taschioglou

Then, feel free to cut me off whenever you want. If I'm like, being too, because I'm not I'm not always great at like synthesising, like I can kind of I can say, like, some cool stuff, maybe, but it can take me a while to actually get all you know what I mean? Like, hey, we generally boil this down by like, like just coming up.

Mary Helen Mack

Alright, and I'm going to be taking some notes, just to make sure if there's something that I'm like, particularly amazing, and I want to get it down exactly as so I might ask you to pause every once in a while, just so I can write.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, and if I talk too fast, you can also tell me because I tend to do that. So often, I like chill, so you can take the notes you want.

Mary Helen Mack

Absolutely fine. All right. So, start by telling me a bit about yourself, your journey so far, particularly your experiences with your gender identity.

Alexander Taschioglou

Okay, so is this more I'm assuming for your projects, your dissertation? Yeah. There's more about the label in the body editing, I assume it's more like the documentable, traditional aspects talk about that. Or he goes like farther back with, like, how I knew and stuff because he's really broad. So, like, do you want to know about the...

Mary Helen Mack

I'd say, however, you want to talk about it, I do have a section in the paper, where I'm gonna bring up HRT as a form of editing, where I like start off, you can do like, I think I sent this to you in the text where I'm like, you can do a haircut, and that's like, sort of a minimal change, but because your hair grows back, or you can get a tattoo, which is more permanent, or you can start changing yourself, like, quite literally from the inside.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah. Okay, so...

Mary Helen Mack

So, however you want to answer this because we have many more questions that get a bit more detailed. This one is just however you want to answer it.

Alexander Taschioglou

Okay, well, for me, I didn't know that I was like, trans until like quarantine sophomore year. I knew something was up before like, I don't know, I don't know if you know, the whole asking mom for a dick at the store when I was four years old. Like I had I did that like I had the internal like, okay, there's something different here. I didn't know what that was. Because I was so fortunate or am to worked with, like my family days kind of let me do my thing. And so, my mom would let me I was like, I want you to call me this you would call me the thing. So, like, I didn't have that stifled feelings was able to kind of vibe and do all that. Obviously, society's gonna be a little different. But in terms of like home base, I had like the big support so I kind of was able to express that understanding from so I could as I got older that feeling went away and really kind of went away like I didn't consciously dislike being a girl anymore was weird now, because I don't know why I did that. But dysphoric things stayed those things I wouldn't be quite aware of like, I could never have my hair down in front of people. I didn't know why. It would always be in a ponytail. And if someone took it down, I'd be like, Oh my God! I was so weird. We're feeling like I was naked. It's like, oh, she's your hair and one or the aversion to like, baggy into feminine clothing, like a lot of little things. Like I'd always be like a guy or like an animal and it make believe game I need to fit in with the guys ---blah, blah, blah. But I was like, fine being a girl into like, when I was like 12. And then it came back with little like, there's a problem here. And I got all moody and dumb. I mean, it's like more than usual. And I was like, "Guys.....", I was talking to my parents about it. And then it went away again. And then a bit dormant and then the years later in quarantine, it came back and I had learned what being non binary was, I learned that concept. And before, I knew about that I was like closed minded about it. Like I hate saying that out loud. But like I was I was like thinking all the things wrong and stupid about it. And then I was kind of forced to learn about it because I was feeling stuff. So that's why education is so important kids.

Mary Helen Mack

I would say ignorance is just a place to start. You don't... everyone doesn't know things, until they do.

Alexander Taschioglou

It's not I don't know about that I didn't know about I feel bad that I assumed all the stupid things like these people are wanting attention to this isn't bad like all those ignorant Jackass assumptions. That's I feel bad about because I know how that feels now to accept. But like I was doing I was saying I was on binding because I knew I was feeling different. But I was it's really hard. Like in my experience, you can't rush self-discovery and I needed to know so bad, I was like… something needs to change that I had this feeling for a lot of my life. Like, I feel like life hadn't really started yet, not like a depressing way like I was doing okay. We just felt like there's something that was going to happen that hadn't happened. And now I know, it was, like coming out, you know, as a guy, I know that because now I feel a lot more integrated. So, I was trying to like feel the right thing. And I learned a lot, I was going by them, I was trying to put things I got

the haircut, you know, I was, I got a binder from my mom for Christmas. And I've been binding for a long time. So, like, those sorts of outward changes helped me feel better. And people at school were chill, I started passing as like heat to people. And I was like, "Okay, this is too good. There's something more here." Because initially, like, being a guy felt like too big. I was like, that is not I don't not all the way over there. I'm like, somewhere over there. But as time went on, and I experimented with things, I let myself try things, the need kept growing, and the middle ever kept moving. So, I think there's kind of a transitional period, which is not an obviously some people, like oh, they're like, Oh, I'm non binary. And that is what they are. That is, it. For me. It was kind of like, I was wrong. And then I realised, but some people think it's transitional. That's not true inherently at all. So not saying that at all. But yeah, I ended up kind of realising, like sometime during junior year that like I was female to male, not like just transmasc/ non binary. And people were receptive to that. And that worked out and then HRT has gotten better. So, it just kind of... I'm grounded now I am I filled my identity, like I understand it, and it's stagnant. So, people haven't move I personally don't I It's where it's at. And just a matter of how close I can get to that. I feel there now, just a matter of like getting some things reflected outwardly. But I'm being seen how I want how I want a sound how I want like all those things. So, I feel like I'm basically where I want to be except, like, I want to get in better shape and I'm gonna get top surgery soon. Which is...

Mary Helen Mack

That's so cool!

Alexander Taschioglou

I know! It might happen in the December.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm so happy for you!

Alexander Taschioglou

I'm so scared of... I've never had surgery, and I hate... I hate needles and veins but like, it's so worth it. And I'm really privileged. I'd love to do so like I'm not....

Mary Helen Mack

Well, if it's any consolation, you will be unconscious.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

So, for that kind of surgery, you won't have to see the needles or veins or anything.

Alexander Taschioglou

But when they put them in, I think I heard they put through the IV. That's going to be the way to look away. I've just gotten blood draws, or okay.... I don't know if it's part of your question. I guess my journey has been like off and on for years until I was able to rapid fire experiment during quarantine. And people have been helpful. There has been really helpful like TikTok, but I watched compilations on YouTube not actually on TikTok and a lot of different things.

Mary Helen Mack

I am exactly the same. Every once and a while me and my friends would be like, "Oh, I saw this thing on Tik Tok." They're like "you're on Tik Tok?" And I'm like, "No, I watch the compilations on YouTube. I'm too old for Tik Tok."

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, if I had TikTok, I'd just be scrolling. And also, the app has some screwed up stuff like racism stuff and like, ew, obviously...

Mary Helen Mack

I've heard if you go into like certain parts of it, it will just like funnel you down to an extremist rabbit hole.

Alexander Taschioglou

oh, I don't know what. I just heard some, like, the company is, and I'm not knowledgeable about it. I'm not going to act like I am. But like, censorship was one thing with like, different standards about what would like violate guidelines for like, black person to say x or swipe or something similar? Like, I don't know. I don't know if it's still happening. There's stuff like the creators themselves, like people not giving, like, people of colour, like creators for like dances or things like that. But I mean, look with the app itself, I think there was problems.

Mary Helen Mack

Well, I know that the algorithm pushes forward people that have a certain look more than other people, which is why a lot of the well-known influencers tend to all look very similar, because the algorithm has decided that these are the people that we should all be following. And they tend to be stereotypically skinny fit white, heterosexual, straight appearing women, for the most part.

Alexander Taschioglou

But yeah, I've learned a lot through the because like, there's a lot of good content on it, you know, like from the creators themselves. And that's how I've learned a lot about different aspects of like, your community or what can and can't be defined and honestly, labels are so subjective. I feel like, honestly, if someone can say I'm x, and you might have a completely incorrect sense of what that means unless you ask them so I brought my labels, but like, it really depends on the person. But I've learned a lot about that. And I've learned about the guy watched so much testosterone content before I got on, I learned so much from like YouTube and stuff. So, the internet, the media has been a huge part in like, realisation and like knowledge on that account too. Can we count documents as like other people?

Mary Helen Mack

Actually, that would be true. It's the documentation, because videos are a form of document. So yeah, that exposure, which the internet is quite an interesting thing, because I mean, you were born when the internet existed, I remember when it first became a thing. And the first computers and it was totally unheard of. I mean, and we're not even that, that big of an age difference. But it's that in such a short amount of time, it has become just so much that you're suddenly able to access. And so many people's stories that you would probably never have met or even heard about before the age of the internet. And just as a side question, based on something you said: Do you think that the quarantine helped or expedited your process of self-discovery in any way? But do you think it helped to be away from high school, away from other people, because it allowed more introspection? Or do you think it you would have reached the same conclusion in the same timeframe had you been in school? What are your thoughts?

Alexander Taschioglou

Technically, and I don't know. But like, I would assume that it helped because I did have a lot of time to myself for introspection. So, I do think if that hadn't had that I would have it's inclusive, but just later on. I also have more freedom to experiment, like I was like "oh, maybe I wanted to get a haircut," but I knew I wasn't because it takes a long time to come back from like something like this to like ponytail, right? So, it was really awkward.

Mary Helen Mack

Your hair was so long

Alexander Taschioglou

I know, I would take the ponytail and I would flip it on like my head and put a hat on. And it looked really dumb and didn't look really like it helped me kind of like mentally, like, feel it. So, I could do all that weird stuff around the house. My family was like not going to judge. They know what's going on. I wouldn't do that at school, because I would be too embarrassed. So, in that regard, I had more freedom to experiment and like fears. Also, I hid in my head too much. So, I think I overthought it. I don't think that slowed it down. I think it might have a little bit of made it harder to make it really annoying. So, I honestly don't

know if I'm glad about that happening during quarantine. But there were definite pros. So, I will say sped it up. But it did make it a little bit more in the weeds. What is going on? I have too much time to think about this. A lot of people realised they were some flavour of queer in quarantine, though.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I've read some articles about that. And the conclusion that a lot of people came up with was, "wow, so the world is a lot gayer than we thought" .... it's almost like when we take away the bullying, people are freer to do that and be themselves. And then there's still people that are like, "no, it's that damn internet. That's the Gay Agenda." Or some of my friends said-- "the Gay Agenda. I need to know that actually, no, no, I need to know the agenda. I'm one of you. Like, please tell me what it is. Am I invited to brunch?" Have you seen there's a gay agenda online: it's like 10am yogalates, 11am brunch and mimosas. And then it like goes through the day, all of a sudden you get to like 2pm and it's like 2pm: overthrow the patriarchy, redesign the schools, collapse the government. Everyone's comments are always "2pm looks way too busy. Seems like a lot." Alright, so next question. In the context of the discussion about the human body as document, how do you define a document from your perspective?

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, I haven't thought about super critically. So, I'm open to what you're talking about and to have my mind changed, but in my experience, when I think of a document, it's like a thing. And it can be the physical or digital. I think of paper stereotypically, but I think it can be both definitely. Or it stores data about a thing, like a person. I mean, see that has information on like, "oh, I need to refer to this to learn about x." This has information on it. I don't know what counts as documentable information. A lot of it is personal stuff. So, you can get logged by the government or apply for certain things or have proof of the validity of a change or whatever it is. I never thought about it that hard before this...

Mary Helen Mack

It's something that sort of sticks with you. But I would say that's a fairly standard answer-- it's a piece of information in some kind of readable, digestible format. Until you get into weird things like what I'm doing. Can you think of an example where your body or aspects of your identity have functioned as a document?

Alexander Taschioglou

function as like, you need to do this to be able to have some opportunity or like, just logged there, like, function as one?

Mary Helen Mack

Not sure. Maybe, in the context of examples where your body or aspects or identity have functioned as a document. Like, have you ever sorted of used your body as proof? if you say, as far as you're saying, it's a

thing that holds information? Do you use your fingerprint scan to get into your phone? Or do you use your face recognition to get into your phone? Because then you are the password in a sense?

Alexander Taschioglou

Okay, yes, actually, I think, okay! So, at work we had a fingerprint thing, and then they updated to the face scanner thing. So, we would do whatever it needed. And we would type in our four-digit code, I was 2175 interpreting, and then you do the fingerprint of the face scan, and then you like clock in. So, you're additionally in the system, you can get paid for what you're doing, when you get to see if you want to leave and clock out.

Mary Helen Mack

So now you are the passcode. I guess you could say your document is like an ID card. But if you're using your physical body, which is becoming more and more prevalent, especially with face recognition, you are now the ID

Alexander Taschioglou

Very creepy.

Mary Helen Mack

Last couple times, I've been on an airplane, I didn't actually have to get out my passport. When I was in the customs line, because the camera recognised me. Alex and I were massively creeped out last time, we were the only two people in line because of like, we were on this weird flight that came in the middle of the night. And we walked through the lines-- separate lines because of our nationalities. I walked up there and they went "Oh, Hello, Mrs. Mack." And I was like, "what?" And he goes up there. "Hello, Mr. Last" And he's just like, "...that makes me uncomfortable that you said that before I even walked up"

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, I'd be a little freaked out by that.

Mary Helen Mack

So that's your face? It's your documentation. A little bit in the modern world.

Alexander Taschioglou

Aside from work, I haven't. I mean, maybe one off like my phone, I have a password. I don't use any part of my body

Mary Helen Mack

Generally speaking, how does documentation impact your life? Or does it? You might not feel like you are impacted by documents.

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, for me personally, I don't have to worry about it too much. Except for like the gender stuff like generally speaking, I might pull something out to like, go to this university, or they have a questionnaire or like, whatever. But my biggest issue with that is like, "Oh, I don't have this" question, then I asked somebody, then they helped me then I'm good. And sometimes I feel weird about how much personal stuff I'm just like writing in this form. But like I'm not too worried about it. Overall. It doesn't like negatively impact me in any regard. And it's not too much of my brain space. Except with like, stuff with like legal name is necessary. Which hasn't been a big deal for us, like my mom and I changed it. So that's been great. But for certain things like driver's license, or social security or whatever, and we haven't finished all this yet. I don't remember...

Mary Helen Mack

It's a process. I've only changed my last name, which is very standard for someone getting married and it's taken years.

Alexander Taschioglou

That's crazy. So, like we have a legal document for that we had to make copies from court orders and some places need the originals we got to make sure we know that we show them those documents of like this person their old name was this new name is this and their sex was female and other side like you know, even though my sex is still female but legal that legal language is stupid. They understand sectors gender, it's like okay, your sex is this or maybe they just want you to document that. I don't know. For the sake of like other people, I like them to assume my sexism and potential, it's wrong or whatever. That's what I'm saying now, legally. So, we have to prove that to the people like, hey, we did this through the channels and whatever. And they're like, Okay, well up to you in our system. So, if you don't have that, then you can't do all those things. Then you have the conflicting information, which at the lowest level can just be like, slightly dysphoric. But big deal. Bigger level, it can, like confusing or certain transactions might not work with like bank stuff, or whatever, but I really get that yet. That's really good my mom has been quite on top of it and helping me like, do this, and this now and I'm like, okay, cool.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I think it's good that you're feeling sort of less impact now. Because I was.... So, I watch a lot of 90-day fiancé, which is the trashiest of all trash shows. Like, I would classify it as worse than the bachelor, although better than Married at First Sight. One of the people who is on it this season, is a transman, and his visa got rejected because the government couldn't understand why his birth certificate was different.

He hadn't filled out the proper form or something, so now he's not able to move to this new country. I think he's supposed to be moving to Brazil. I forget what country he's moving to. Doesn't matter anyway. So, it's obviously a massive impact this one form is having on this person's life. So, I'd say it's very good to not experience something on that level and to feel like these things are not having a huge impact. But, definitely make sure you do everything with the documentation. You want to be able to have that freedom when you've graduated, and you're like, "What am I going to do with my life?" Leave all the options there

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah. I don't even know what I want to do. But like I hopefully I will know whether I'm graduated, fingers crossed.

Mary Helen Mack

If it's any consolation, I still don't know what I'm doing. I have no idea what I'm doing.

Alexander Taschioglou

(Laughing)

Mary Helen Mack

I'm just sort of [vaguely gestures around] I don't even know,

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, that's, that's, there's wisdom in that for myself, though

Mary Helen Mack

Leave your options open

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

Always leave them open. Or, my parents always told me “You know why adults ask kids 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' They don't actually care. They just want ideas."

Alexander Taschioglou

That's funny. That's a good one. I like that one.

Mary Helen Mack

Moving on, how has your gender identity been documented or represented in official documents? So, we touched on that a little bit? And has this affected any of your experiences, particularly as you're going into university?

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, honestly, it's been good because I've had the privilege of being able to legally change things. And you know, world is growing kind of sometimes. So, a lot of offices, like, the less formal stuff, at least, your kind of able to just input things and they don't need you to provide shit. So, I try to just input things how I want to. So, I mean, it doesn't really impact me a whole lot. Except like, when I see myself getting addressed correctly. Feels good. I'm like, "oh I got mail with Alexander Taschioglou" in the mail. I got an email from some government person because I sent this like, you know, when you get like, you can send a letter for a cause they have a letter all typed out. I've done a lot of those. And sometimes they respond to you with like, canned thing, I think. They have your name in it. So, Mr. Taschioglou, and I'm like [big smile] so like those things. They just feel good. I'm like, "Oh, I'm getting recognised as this by strangers or in the workplace, even if it's like automated, you know, it's, that's cool. So just kind of like a little boost of like, hell, yeah. Gender Euphoria. Aside from that, not too much. Aside from we were already gone over, I think.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. So, and just sort of a quick follow on to that: Do you feel like you are more impacted by paperwork than other people or students in your position? And by position, I mean, sort of like in your class doing the same sort of year entry as you like, do you have to complete more documents than average, or sort of show any more evidence or do you feel like the system as it is currently, you're not doing extra things, if that makes sense?

Alexander Taschioglou

In most ways I think that’s a “no" for me because a lot of different contexts that people would need to have more paperwork. I don't have those going on besides for the gender thing. Like anything that I've talked about. Not everyone's gonna have to do that. For college, I haven't had any documentation that I can remember. So, for college, no extra work. For other things in general, extra work in that specific regard for someone who's not legally changing things, but not So, a whole lot. Like if you're just like my class of people with paperwork in any regard, definitely not above average.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. Because I was also going to ask if you knew of any people that were like, maybe out of state. If they had a comparable amount, because I know that, like, for universities, within Oregon, out of state people do have more paperwork just as a known sort of thing.

Alexander Taschioglou

So definitely not above average then.

Mary Helen Mack

Do any of these paperwork or documentations make it more difficult or challenging to live as your authentic self?

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, no, except that I just get like... it's not harder to be the person because most people in my life, they know me, and they accept me. And so, I get all that like grounding, mystery, assurance, everything, and respect in that regard from the people. The biggest thing is if like, I haven't updated something. Like, about who I was working, I hadn't gotten my name change from Alexandria on the system, because like, I forget why. Because like, I asked someone about it, she was like "bring your license, and we can do right now" so super like, "yes, whatever you want." But there's like the bank issue with like, transferring money, and my mom was like, we have to do it to like maneuver this thing was before we can, like, modify that in, we never really got to that. And it's just because I'm nervous and socially anxious and like procrastinate-y, just fine, but so like, it's still Alexandria in the system. And I have this really, really sweet lady at-- talking about this just brought it back--- but this lady at work. When we get our checks, they would have direct deposit. So, the money goes directly into my bank account. But they have the physical like void checks, I guess, so you can like document. Hey! So, they say my dead name on it, and I would get these checks and it'd be in a pile with everyone else so anyone could look through and just see that. And I started seeing like little sticky things put over the name, with just "Alex" written on it, like who's doing that? And I finally got like, handed directly this one lady at the front desk, and I was like, hey, is this you? And he's like, Yeah, and I was like, that's so you know, I was like expressing appreciation. You know, such an ally move. I'm always doing stupid shit. Like, she was like, oh, yeah, I have a sibling who's nonbinary, I get it. So, people have my back. That hit me, then I was always a little worried if like they didn't get there. Like who would see that? Because like, the kitchen was super queer. No one cared. The residents though.... And some of the staff.... I wasn't nervous, but when I got handed a check by the HR lady, who then every other way, so sweet, and I really like except she made some weird comment about it rubbed me the wrong way that really gave me transphobic vibes. So, like, I have conflicting opinions on her. But she handed me my check. And it hadn't like--- Tara hadn't gotten to it--- and saw her sensibility all obviously she's been really nice. But I was like, "Oh crap," you know. My procrastination is coming through. And she can see this, but she didn't say anything. She didn't treat me any differently. So, either she just was being respectful and hiding stuff. Or I misjudged her, which I doubt. Or she just didn't realise it. But I So, didn't... I couldn't say anything. I just took it and left. I was like .... that’s how I compare. And I also don't have people misgendering me and that me really so like if something like that.... I get nervous.... happens. I'm pretty sensitive to it. I have thin skin because I haven't had to like put a metaphorical callous to it, I guess. So yeah, it makes it like you got

to be stealthy, you got to be a bit careful. But I was able to, I was passing at work. People were calling me both things. So, like, the documentation was kind of irrelevant, except for like that technical side of things.

Mary Helen Mack

I think part of the whole like not being deadnamed... I mean, I don't think I've ever called you by "Alexandria." You've always been Alex.

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, like, people who wouldn't know that or like if I had changed my name to something drastically different. Like I know that you would follow that.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah. I mean, no one's perfect. Every once in a while, I slip up with a load of people and things.

Alexander Taschioglou

Oh, yeah, me too.

Mary Helen Mack

But I wonder if that sort of factored into your name changing decision to keep it so close, because keeping it so that you're just, I mean, like you said you prefer Alexander or Xander now, but that Alex is still acceptable.

Alexander Taschioglou

I don't feel wrong with that. Yeah, I mean, it is a pro, the minuses are the same. So, like, that's easy too. I like my name. Like if I didn't have all the femininity attached to it. I just like how that sounds, so like let's do something similar. Also means "defender man, which is cool." Letter X.

Mary Helen Mack

Alexander the Great!

Alexander Taschioglou

So, I like my name I liked you know, now I'm like, you look for something new. But for a while I just liked being called Alex from the get go. I was like, let's be able to maintain that. Because I wasn't dysphoric about that, because that's neutral, in my experience. So, I think if I didn't have the innate pros to the name in my head, the whole "Oh, it's So, easier to keep," it wouldn't have been a big enough factor to make me

not change, and I would change if I needed to. But I just... there were other reasons to want to keep it. I guess, in with a longer version, like Alexander, I've options, I can experiment with stuff, I can do different things. And that's fine, too.

Mary Helen Mack

I always like names that you can actually change into whatever sort of vibe suits you. I was jealous of those kinds. I'm very jealous of people; I want to do that. Because my name does not lend itself to that.

Alexander Taschioglou

You have two

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, but it's always been the two of them together. And they're both aggressively feminine.

Alexander Taschioglou

Do you prefer something different? Just let me know.

Mary Helen Mack

Ugh, no. I always wanted to change my name, like more completely, or to be referred to by my last name. But now my last name isn't even my last name anymore.

Alexander Taschioglou

You could like move that to a middle name?

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, I did. I moved Mack, it is now my middle name.

Alexander Taschioglou

Mack is my middle name, too. Because it was May. That was really... because like that was after, I think, Aunt Carey and I wanted to keep the maternal family connection. But didn't want May, you know, so I was like, "Okay, let's just do Mack", because that's still on my mom's side. And it's related. [Note: Alexander's mom (maiden name Mack) is the sister of Mary Helen's dad (surname Mack)].

Mary Helen Mack

Oh yeah, Aunt Carey's middle name was May.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yes, that was the reason for mine. So, it's okay, I want to keep some connection in this way. That's cool. Well, middle name twins

Mary Helen Mack

Actually, is pretty cool. Alright. Moving on. Now we're getting more into, less documents outside of you, more about the body. So, what does bodily autonomy mean to you?

Alexander Taschioglou

Bodily autonomy, I feel like, just of the top of my head.... Overall definition: For me, it's like, the ability, and it's really broad, like the ability to kind of do what you want. When you want, excluding situations where you're going to infringe on someone else's bodily autonomy, or like harm somebody. Obviously, there are certain rules that we need to have. But in terms of like, you just doing you, like, you should have the ability, and that means laws, like accessibility needs to be there, resources need to be there. And the like, allowance needs to be there. Like all those things. You can't be like, "Oh, these people can do what they want." But then, like, have this in place to like deny those things, that's not really the time.

Mary Helen Mack

And what does it mean for you to be able to edit your body? And this can mean editing in any way you want to take it.

Alexander Taschioglou

Um, I guess there's like two categories from my experience where there's, like, permanent and temporary. Or like, non-permanent. So, a lot of the performing gender stuff, for me personally, a lot of the social stuff is the stuff that is not permanent, like the haircut--- that can grow back--- as a signifier of a lot of things for me. I'm finding the way I'm dressing, the way that I'm currently.... I'm using like all those. I use pronouns, those are editing, the other things, physical things, I'm editing my appearance, and I'm being perceived, but those can all be reversible. Hormones.... some of those effects reverse if you go off, but some of them don't. So that's like more permanent editing. So, I guess it's just in any sense done. But anyway, you make something about yourself different. It's probably going to be perceived by other people. Maybe it's not, I don't know. Like, when I get top surgery, people aren't going to know unless I show them, "hey, I have scars" like whatever.

Mary Helen Mack

Especially if you've been wearing a binder, ideally it will look very similar under the clothes assuming that your binder is good and that the surgery results are good. But it will FEEL for you

Alexander Taschioglou

I wear so many clothes. I'm so right. I wear, like fall stuff and like summer and I'm just.... people are like, "aren't you hot?" and I'm like, "yeah." Like, it's an easy problem to have if I you know, I'd rather do that and not be able to bind, or just wear like one shirt and want to shoot myself. So, like, that'll be nice to just be able to go in water looking normal, or one thing and now we're in a whole class like, you know, a lot of stuff that's off topic.

Mary Helen Mack

Also, hopefully, a lot less physically painful. At least I know, I can't wear my binder for more than like, four or five hours.

Alexander Taschioglou

You bind?

Mary Helen Mack

Sometimes. Yeah.

Alexander Taschioglou

Oh, cool, good.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm um, I would call myself non binary, except that I'm still feeling like quite female. So, I sort of like go... I have days where I feel like a girl and days when I feel like an absolutely nothing.

Alexander Taschioglou

That's so valid.

Mary Helen Mack

So, I have... I basically have all the kit, everything from hyper femininity to absolutely nothing. I'm currently growing out this undercut that I have. But if I put up my hair, and I've got my undercut growing, and I put a baseball cap on, it looks like my hair is like super short. So that's there. I've got whole box of wigs long and short, depending on how I'm feeling. Got the binders. But then I additionally, on the opposite

end of the binders, I have all the push up bras, all the padded things. And you know there's like chicken cutlets, but they're for buts. I've got those.

Alexander Taschioglou

I'm so bad at clothes, but good for you.

Mary Helen Mack

Well, there's like this thing that people put in their bras to it's like extra padding so you can put on a padded bra. And then you put in these things which looks like pieces of raw chicken. It's like a silicone thing. And it pushes it up. Some people just do it with a sock. But they also make them that they're like sticky pads for the butt; and fitness influencers use them in photoshoots--- those butts aren't real. So, I've got that stuff as well. So, I'm just saying, from my personal experience, the binder is not a comfortable long-term wear,

Alexander Taschioglou

I do it longer than I'm supposed to. And I'm going to see if that's been bad. Because I have the pre appointment in October, they're going to check, have to that's take it off and be like, here's what you're working with. So, I'll know if I've been fucking it up or not. It hasn't been... it was really painful. For me, I have no breathing issues or rib issues. But sometimes it gets a little bit like, just topic like skin surface. And I can't, but no, I'm not.... I'm not great with that. But it's not super tight. Like it's not super painful, usually in my experience, but it'd be a lot less uncomfortable because I fidget with it. And I have to adjust when I move too much because I have to push them to like, work kind of in so when I just move around or stretch or do whatever, they move back. So I have to like go find a way to do that without getting noticed.

Mary Helen Mack

That, I get it. At least, like when I'm in the gym and a sports bra is all the time you move around. And the big things are moving.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, that's why I hate running sometimes. Seems like, all right.

Mary Helen Mack

I don't run.

Alexander Taschioglou

I don't run either

Mary Helen Mack

I think no matter what body type I had running is still terrible. I mean, some people like it

Alexander Taschioglou

I might start to. Well, I run when I'm like... If I'm not sober or I'm really happy I want to run. That's funny. So, feeling better about it.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm like Terry Crews in Brooklyn99 where he's like, “I work out every day how bad could running be? It's immediately awful."

Alexander Taschioglou

So True

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, so tell me: what edits have you made to your body? And how have they impacted you? I'm going to combine this with the next one: So how to use clothing, hairstyles and other forms of self-expression to convey your gender identity. And how do you perceive these as documents or messages to others?

Alexander Taschioglou

Can you say the first question again,

Mary Helen Mack

What edits have you made to your body? And how have they impacted you?

Alexander Taschioglou

Okay, so this so like the social versus physical. On the ones that send, well both send messages actually. Basically, for my specific personal experience with gender, because obviously there's a lot of ways to be trans or non-binary /non-conforming or just you know, so this is, this is this is me. But I am one of the trans people who is like, "okay, my identity is stagnate, I am binary. I'm like female to male. No caveat. I'm all the way and I want to be seen as cisgender so if I can I want to pass. Not everyone wants to pass, but I do. And I'm like, "How do I pass?" Masculinity is a construct, right? They're just constructs. You can technically be masculine and do anything, I think. Because it depends on the person and more what it means to them. For me trying to pass based on, I try to follow my understood, like the way that I understand

societal norms, just to be. So, I am reflecting what I think people deem as masculine. I'm not really like, "how do I feel as masculine?" Because when I align with what they think that is what makes me feel that way, I feel like I'm being perceived correctly. That makes sense? So, you know, the short hair, I'm like, "let's do that, fine, let's do that." The way I'm dressing, I'm like, "Okay, let's do that." I don't wear jewelry even though I'm getting more comfortable with that. And I know, logically, you can do it, it's not gonna make you any less of a masculine man, whatever. But like, I don't, I don't wear makeup. I'm too insecure for that. But I think once I am on testosterone longer, and I've gotten surgery, whenever, I'm going to get more effeminate. Maybe I'm going to feel more comfortable to kind of explore that. Because the more I'm....the older I'm getting, the more comfortable I'm getting with the more feminine side and the more debatably effeminate because I'm Bi and I got the, you know, [wrist flick] like, I just want that. I'm getting more comfortable as I get older. But right now, I'm just trying to align with what I think I need to do to be seen as like a Cis guy.

Mary Helen Mack

So do you think maybe you're going a little bit hypermasculine at the moment, just because

Alexander Taschioglou

yeah,

Mary Helen Mack

you're trying to sort of pass a bit more, but then when you're fully transitioned, there's a little bit more comfort and room to maneuver there.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yes. Exactly. So that has been like that. But also, that's more like the social stuff, like the things that are reversible, like the haircut and whatever, like signaling. In terms of being like a document, I guess, it's just like, what I expect people to assume. So, I'm kind of put that out there. If I think it looks bad, like, I'm not going to do something that I actually feel gross about just for that, like, it's going to be something that I have to feel okay, about also. But that's like a large factor, right. In terms of like HRT, that obviously has similar stuff, like the fact that it's not a lot, but I have like, some amount of facial hair now. So okay, that's a signal people associate, as a secondary male sex characteristic, people are going to assume things from that. So, like, that's a signal that I'm trying to put out there, the voice helps a lot. My body hasn't changed a whole lot. Because like, I've heard with fat redistributing, it's what happens if you lose it and regain that it moves, and I haven't really done that. So, like, it's kind of like, I'm still doesn't change my body a whole lot. It's easier to gain muscle; I'm a little more vascular in my arm, which I love, because that's such a thing. It's not looking like that right now, but if I am moving a lot, or I'm lifting something, or leave my arm to hang, you know. More than it was at high school. So, there are certain signals that people can assume that. And they're also just like, a very internal, like, hey, I am visualising what I want to or what I feel like I am and I'm seeing that. And that's so cool. So, that's a little more internally like, this feels better. Like when I feel how I sound when I talk that feels better, feels differently knowing when you're lower versus higher.

Because I get dysphoric when I'm alone, not just like around other people. So, it's not always on being perceived by people. It's also just how I'm perceiving myself. So, it's less intense, because I know everything about myself. And so, I'm not going to be like, what, I find out a secret. No. Like, I still bind when I'm alone. I still get the feelings and I'm like.... I still don't wear just like one shirt because I don't like knowing that.... you know, so it's a weird.... I don't understand it. I don't understand why people's brains are so like this. I don't understand why. What happened to make me reject my physical form so much. But like, that one's more internal. So, the HRT specialist helped me with that. So, it's not all just perception. I'm content, but like, I don't know. It's interesting question.

Mary Helen Mack

I think you answered one of my other questions. Do you believe that alteration of your external appearance means more as self-validation-- how you would feel about yourself even alone in the room with no mirrors and no outside interaction? Or as a signal to others? You saying that you bind even when you're on your own just because it feels more "you" or makes you more comfortable is sort of the answer to that question. It's more, would you say it's more self-validating? Like, even if you were, like I said alone in a room, no outside interaction, no mirrors, so you didn't even have to see yourself if you didn't want to, is it more like how you feel?

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, I can see myself without a mirror, just looking down. If we remove that layer, the knowledge of it is not great. But if I'm not able to see myself, I can forget about it, I'm totally fine. If I were like, not able to see, I'd probably be a lot less dysphoric. I'm not wishing for that all! I want to see, obviously.

Mary Helen Mack

But I mean more as far as.... I suppose what I'm getting at with this is: it sounds like you are making these changes, where even if you never saw another person, you would still be wanting to change your physicality in this way, because that's how it feels authentic to you. Yes?

Alexander Taschioglou

I would have the same feelings. I don't know how much I would pursue. Because, right now, the time in the therapy and like, the risk factors and stuff are totally worth it, because it impacts my daily life. If I were locked in a room forever, I don't know if I would think it would be worth it. Because like, I don't know, I would just know what's up. And I wouldn't like.... Because it is worse, if say... I have dysphoria when I'm alone, but it gets stronger when I'm around somebody else. So that is like, I can't do this until I'm dead. This is not sustainable. But like if I were alone, maybe. Maybe it would be more so, but I would still want I would still feel wrong, I would still wish I could snap and be different. So that part's the same. I don't know how to weigh it out. But that might not be your question.

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, you also had said something which was relation to this other question: Do you have aesthetic inspirations? You had said you're visualising what you want, and that feels really cool. Do you have any sort of aesthetic inspirations? Like do you have a specific person/ type/ aesthetic/ ideal that you're trying to look like? Or is it evolving more in a step-by-step organic way? Do alterations come in pieces with sort of the goalposts moving? Or are you going like this, this is the thing in my mind, and we're working toward this specific nonmoving goal?

Alexander Taschioglou

I have an idea that's really confident, but I'm completely like, I don't care if it moves. If it moves, great. We'll see. I talked about the whole being able to be in touch with more feminine stuff. It's like more comfortable. So, like in that regard. I kind of surprised myself sometimes, like this chipping now, but like nail polish. I think that's so fun. Because I feel like I'm being perceived as queer, even though you don't have to be gay to do nails. I know that, but like, we know what a man with it means. Oh my god, you know. So. That's why Harry Styles has so much like "ooh, speculation" going on. Yeah, like, I wouldn't dream of wearing nail polish like pre-T. I would be way too afraid to be clocked as a girl. Even because people see that, but now because everything else that you get with me, I pass and so I feel like I can do that. So, with that, it's kind of like, that just comes from within and I kind of realised that as I go in terms of like my "vision." I hate saying that... I mean, I'm into it with my body, with the dysphoria stuff also. There's like some fat level which I prefer less. No big deal. You know, you don't notice because I work with baggy clothing but like I notice, and I'm like.... so, I see all these people on like, of course on media or Instagram wherever. None of its transmen too, so...

Mary Helen Mack

Instagram is not real.

Alexander Taschioglou

Like you see these jacked people and I don't want to be jacked. I don't want to be super big. But I want to be stronger. I want to be like Doritos, Doritos vibes, because right now it's like the hips I have, like, my fat goes there. So, I definitely have hips and I want that to go away and I want to like get actual back muscles so I can actually have that wider shape going on. So, I made like upper body. and want that to be stronger and I want to be leaner. So, I want to be like, I want to be able to go public and swim with just shorts on at some point. Be like "Hell yeah, we can do this." I want to..... how TMI can we get? Because I don't want to make it weird

Mary Helen Mack

However much you want to get into it. I mean, not everything's gonna make in to the final dissertation draft, but whatever you want to talk about.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, I want to be comfortable being seen in a sexual context, that is huge too. Because the person I was with a while ago, that person was very close to the community, and they understood what I was dealing with. And they would do things to preemptively mitigate dysphoria that I wouldn't even think about. They'd be like, "Oh, do you want to try this? And do you want to do this first?" and I was like, "that's such a good idea." Like, that person really made it easy. And I didn't have to make it through the, "you know, they were fine with it." And obviously, if they weren't, their prerogative, I would understand if someone's like, "I don't want to do this, if you're not doing this," I would get that. Right? But I don't want to have to find someone who's really in-the-know and knows what to ask. I want to be able to just to, like, do stuff, and feel okay about it. And like, whatever. Because I can't move, I don't have full range of motion right now without feeling worried about stuff. And so, with other activities, like just swimming in water. And you're like, "I want to do things in feel good about that." So, I want to get better shape and top surgeries and maintenance for that. So that's like...

Mary Helen Mack

That's coming up!

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, I want to get tattoos mainly. No shame in scarring at all, but I personally see that as passing gold. Right. So, I want to cover that. I don't know, do you have any ideas, let me know.

Mary Helen Mack

Most of the chest tattoos that I'm aware of. Or at least all the ones that I have saved on my, my sort of vision boards are very feminine, just because they're for mastectomy survivors. And I use a lot of those in a series of artwork I did. I would say tattoos over scars, if you get someone that has experience in that the results can be absolutely amazing. So, I would say to find an artist that maybe works with things like that. Some people do specialise in that kind of thing. So, I would say: go find someone who specialises because the tissue will be different, like scar tissue is different than just like skin tissue. So, you want someone knows that. And also, my advice to anyone getting a tattoo is: cheap is not good. If you can't afford the artists that you want, maybe wait a little bit, because it's going to be on your body forever. It's not worth saving $100 to go to someone who's gonna do it for less money if they're not as experienced. I mean, there are people that are less expensive that are very good. Always ask to see a portfolio of things that have healed. If their portfolio includes only absolutely fresh tattoos, like they only have pictures of right when they finished tattooing, that's a red flag. You want someone that has a record of like a month down the road for a lot of their tattoos because that's where the real sort of artistry and experience comes in is after the healing. Yeah. So that's my advice for generally picking a tattoo artist. Loads of experience. definitely invest the money, even if it means waiting. And yeah, so that's So, and don't get a dead pigeon like my husband Alex's friend did. Oh, it looks weird.

Alexander Taschioglou

It looks crucified?

Mary Helen Mack

No, it's like, you know, the pigeon. And he's like, he's an amazing artist. Like it looks great. But it's also just like, you're very committed to this dead pigeon. I think he got it when he was 18. And I'm just like, Huh....

Alexander Taschioglou

That's funny.

Mary Helen Mack

No dead pigeons. Okay. So, moving right along. Have you encountered any instances where your physical appearance or style or expression has been misinterpreted or misunderstood? You talked a little bit about how you sort of actively tried to mitigate that.

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, it's funny, I kind of have opposite issues now. And the second one is really an issue but like, for, like, I passed, sometimes pre testosterone, but not always. If someone were to read me as a girl and then address me accordingly other people in my life would often correct them for me, because it's, for some reason, really hard to come for yourself. but no other people. It's a known thing. You get embarrassed if you're looking at position, you feel high maintenance, whatever it is. Like, people have helped me out. But I've also just been like, correcting and, you know, I'm my high school. We had our assholes, but as a school, we were chill. And a lot of the kids were chill. Or this one guy, math class, read me as a girl. And I was like, "Oh, by the way, you know, blah, blah." And he was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And then he started like, doing it immediately just to correct himself. So, like, usually it went well. And I was safe enough to be able to do that. And so, I could just do that and people would listen. So, it was more, just in the moment like "shit, okay, I know, I look girly," and I want to crawl into a hole. But people are understanding of what I am trying to do. They're going to humour me. And I always know they're putting in an active effort. It's not just something they're innately seeing. And like, I don't know. But usually, it went pretty well. Now, I pass and I a lot of people read me as a CisHet guy, and I want to... I want to not be. I don't want to go straight man; I want to look a little bit [wrist flip to signify gayness]. So, like, I made a lot of jokes and I so I try to make it known quickly. But like, obviously, these are really difficult markers. You can't really know a lot, but like the bleached hair, the nail polish and you know, but I've learned I still dress like a straight man. And again, once I'm more comfortable, I'll probably expand upon that. But it's funny. I

Mary Helen Mack

I was gonna say, the plaid shirt is very like, basic, bro.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah, I have a lot of I have a lot of plaid things. Um, so true.... So now it's like, I'm being seen as a straight man. And I'm like, I don't want to. But that's not like, hindered. It's not in any way causing problems. that's just like... the circles I'm in, I want them to know, I'm one of you. That's like a minor thing.

Mary Helen Mack

Are there any changes that you've made that are 1. not "stereotypically" trans, like getting a haircut is something that everyone does, as an example, that have impacted you? And 2. are there any changes that surprised you that you've made by how little or how much they affected you? Perhaps something that you thought was going to be a little thing that ended up being actually very affirming or something that you thought was going to be really big and then it turned out didn't actually mean as much?

Alexander Taschioglou

Okay, this might be TMI. Stop me if need be. One thing that happened on HRT, that's one of the earlier changes is... you think about bottom growth. You think about that? Okay, it's genitalia related. Is that fine talking about?

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, that's fine.

Alexander Taschioglou

So you don't get a dick. Thats not what happens unfortunately.

Mary Helen Mack

It would make surgery journey so much easier

Alexander Taschioglou

And it depends on how much for everyone right? But like down there, it gets longer, it gets bigger, it gets more sensitive and it can kind of it just, the way that it behaves when you're feeling a certain way can be more reminiscent of the other side of things. So basically, for some people it's more or less dysphoric because it's like, "here's the thing that I have that I wish I didn’t and it's larger." More of itself, less like..... Other people are like, "Okay, this is distancing itself from the norm. It's closer to what I wish I had." Better. I'm part of group two-- thank God. That has been way more for me than I expected. I didn't think it'd be a big deal, because I've never been that sore at that for some reason. Boobs are like, "kill me." But down there, it's okay. Periods were kind of rough, but they're gone now, as agreed to. This is awesome can do that. So that change has been weirdly affirming. I wasn't expecting that. Oh yeah! Screaming now is super fun. I used to hate how my voice sounded and scream and it was high pitched. I like screaming. So, whenever I can scream, like at an event or whatever, I will just scream or yell or something. Get up and

making noise. And also, I used to hate how I would cry. So, I like to cry in general because my stupid brains like "Oh, masculinity." But I know it's not true. I know. But I would hate how at something I would cry. And now it's a lot less that way. So, I feel better doing that. Like alone even. So those are weirdly important. The vein thing, it's not huge but that's been really great ego thing, because I associate that like, like all those like guys on TikTok like, "Oh, look at that", and I'm like "I wish." So that has been cool, too. And like, the voice, pretty obvious. But they're just things that like. I think basically, anything that I expected to be important was kind of important. So, I didn't get to do better.

Mary Helen Mack

As a student, have you encountered any situation where your identity we kind of went over this one where your identity documentation has been important or relevant to your university experience? Were there any ways the university could improve support for students in your position in terms of documentation representation? Or do you think that they are doing a solid job?

Alexander Taschioglou

I mean, from my experience, you know, I think it's because Willamette is really, very liberal school. A lot of us are queer here. They have, like, a lot of the staff is queer, which is fantastic. I love so much. I got professor, she's using she/they pronouns, I'm like, that's crazy. I've never had a teacher using that. That's so cool. So, like the schools is on a, in the, you know, they let you self-select and put in preferred name, and they're very aware of that. So, I think they're doing a good job. But I had the privilege of having the legal stuff to not really worry about what college anymore so like, I don't know the ins and outs how that would have been if I hadn't gotten like legal name change beforehand. I would have had things. For me personally, it hasn't really been a thing.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. How do you feel about the use of your personal information, like your gender identity or anything in the university records or systems? Do you have any concerns about your privacy? Or, you said that you had it all changed beforehand, so I don't even know if the university has that as record

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, they know I think I've put like, transman for like the "describe your gender identity", so like, they know, I don't care what they know, if you're just like gender stuff, I don't care what they know. Sometimes I get a survey which says they have a lot of information and they say it's anonymous, but they want to keep your email for like, something else. And I don't want to be stupid, conservative conspiracy brain of like "the government wants to learn from it."

Mary Helen Mack

They do want the information though

Alexander Taschioglou

They do want it,

Mary Helen Mack

Facebook is selling our information that is a known

Alexander Taschioglou

That part is true. But I'm, like....

Mary Helen Mack

No tinfoil hat, but you have to know that your information is being sold

Alexander Taschioglou

A little, I get a little concern sometimes, but like, it's a minor concern. But in terms of like the trans aspect, that part doesn't really concern me how, like the university level

Mary Helen Mack

Right, we're almost to the end. In what ways do you feel empowered or disempowered by the documentation or representation of your gender identity? Are there areas where you would like to see more agency or control?

Alexander Taschioglou

Well, I kind of talked about this already, with the whole, like, getting an automated email getting mail with like Mr. Like, that kind of thing. When it matches, it feels good. And what doesn't, it feels bad. In terms of like, I mean, I wish ...I wish people knew more in give us just a little bit more time because like, the places like Willamette, or like the places that are that are, you know, queer spaces, especially, or they at least they So, care, they have the opportunity for you to be able to put in your own information, your name, and pronouns. And it's not just what's your gender, man, woman, other, they have like an actual scroll down list option, and still have "other" because not everyone is going to fit into a label they have, and that's totally valid. That's good. But they have what they put into even just like male, female, non-binary, which not everyone's going to hit one of those. But at least it's not just like, you're a part of the binary or you're not really involved. You know, it's good that to specify. I wish people were more educated because sometimes you see stuff where they put things in the wrong category that they call being transgender that put that under the orientation heading. That's not an orientation. And this is like semantic. This is a little stuff. But the reason I get hung up on it is because it's little things that are what we passively absorb. By accident. It's

not even like you focusing on it's the things that you don't even realise mean anything that you digest. Like, what are you? Man, trans man? They're separated. You could say: cisman, trans man. But if you say, Man, trans man, you're implying something that we don't count completely. And that's not going to make my life bad. I know it's small. But people absorb that. And it really, especially see, I wish people....

Mary Helen Mack

Because it basically makes the "Cis" sound like "normal."

Alexander Taschioglou

Exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

Although I like referring to those people as "default settings,"

Alexander Taschioglou

That's funny. But that's clearly but yeah, joke. And they are the default setting. Kind of, you know, I just wish people took the time to notice a little bit more just to not be actively wrong, or actively dismissive. That's where I see more control. But a lot of things I do have that a lot of things. I'm surprised by how many things I see, but then again, I live in Oregon. Like, you know, there's a lot of good things happening.

Mary Helen Mack

I am glad you are having a positive experience. I am glad that a lot of these questions not a long list of things that could be one going much better.

Alexander Taschioglou

I am in good hands in a good position for a lot of other things that could be that I could have been shit on by something. Like big man in the sky could have been like... I don't know if I believe, but like, I could have gotten a really bad hand. In terms of like being trans, I got a lot of good things, I got a lot of lack of intersectionality and I got a lot of resources, so my answers are probably going to be shorter than maybe someone else

Mary Helen Mack

I do like how you mentioned intersectionality. That is good. And then the final question: is there anything else you would like to share or discuss regarding the topic of human bodies documentation or your personal experience with anything? Any other comments?

Alexander Taschioglou

I guess it's one interesting thing that might not really be relevant, but this is true for a lot of ways, but documentation is a lot about how your logged and how you're perceived by other people and how they can categorise you and know how to perceive you and think about you and handle you and whatever. You get certain messages enough and they become internalised as they should just kind of see yourself other people see you with what you think they are. This is kind of interesting, because in that regard, the documents can kind of like, become your internal code. You have to kind of unlearn certain things. Like I've got plenty of like internalised transphobia, where I will let myself do a certain thing, because I'm like, "Oh, I can't do that. Or I feel weird," even though I know logically, that's stupid. And I would give someone else shit for saying that out loud. But I think it's still about other people. And I'm like, "You're being transphobic. Right now, don't do that." Or about myself. I don't like shit on the in walking weird. So, I guess, in the way that societal things become internalised. But that's not the document thing is probably related in some decent way. But like, it might be too broad. I don't know if that makes sense.

Mary Helen Mack

I really liked that, that is a good way of putting the experience of "documents do affect you," and even little coded words within them do really have an impact. Like we just said, putting cis- in front of things or not putting that means it's a little bit othering. But it's those little things that sort of affect how people perceive you and how society moves forward.

Alexander Taschioglou

Yeah

Mary Helen Mack

And now I'm just thinking about these things online where it's like, basically homophobic or transphobic people being really stupid where they're like, “oh my god, like they don't even have straight as an option." And heterosexual is the very first option, literally. Or "I'm not a HomoSapien. I'm straight"

Alexander Taschioglou

I've heard this people are like it's HomoSapien not HeteroSapien. It's the Bible the Straight-ble

Mary Helen Mack

It's Adam and Eve, not Adam or Eve. That means that I get to like both thank you

Alexander Taschioglou

(Laughter)

Mary Helen Mack

I think that is basically all for me. So, thank you so much for having the talk with me and hope you enjoy the rest of your Sunday.

Alexander Taschioglou

I appreciate the call

INTERVIEW WITH EL TRUCHAN

El Truchan, 47F, is a multi-award winning, Level 4 Accredited Microblading, Permanent Makeup, Scalp Micro Pigmentation (SMP), Medical Tattoo & Medical Micropigmentation, Micro-needling & Plasma Fibroblast Specialist; and one of the UK and International leading experts in Permanent Cosmetics. She holds qualifications in Permanent Cosmetics, Scalp Micropigmentation and Medical Tattooing as well as an International Accreditation from The Society of Permanent Cosmetics Professionals; and been performing procedures since 2014. She is a member of SPCP and the Royal Society of Medicine. Dedicated to Permanent Cosmetics, SMP, Skin Aesthetics & Medical Tattooing, El doesn’t perform any other types of treatments.

This interview offers insights into the intersection of aesthetics, body modification, and personal identity, addressing the theme of the human body as a document. The interviewee's perspectives on beauty and self-expression are explored within the context of the paper's goals.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction:

Could you please introduce yourself and provide some background on your work as an aesthetician and tattooist specializing in permanent makeup?

Concept of "Editing" Humans:

In your line of work, you engage in various forms of body modification and enhancement. How do you perceive the concept of "editing" humans, and how does it relate to the broader theme of the human body as a document?

Can you discuss the role of permanent makeup as a form of body editing and how clients approach this concept?

Individual Ideas of Beauty:

Through your career have you seen Trends emerging or do people generally seek similar outcomes throughout the years?

Have you ever had a client want something that you did not believe would yield the best result? How did that turn out?

What is your ideal outcome for someone seeking your services?

How do you collaborate with your clients to understand their individual ideas of beauty and the specific modifications they desire?

What are some common motivations and goals expressed by clients seeking permanent makeup or other aesthetic enhancements?

Documentation of Beauty Preferences:

Permanent makeup and other aesthetic procedures can be seen as a form of documentation of a client's beauty preferences. How do you view this aspect of your work?

Do you maintain records or documentation related to your clients' procedures and preferences, and if so, how do you manage this information?

Empowerment and Identity:

Some individuals may seek aesthetic enhancements as a means of self-expression and empowerment. Can you share examples of clients who have used your services in this way, and how have their experiences been documented?

How do you navigate the intersection of aesthetics and personal identity in your practice?

Ethical Considerations:

What ethical considerations do you take into account when discussing and performing permanent makeup procedures with clients?

How do you ensure that clients are well-informed about the potential implications and outcomes of these procedures?

Changing Beauty Trends:

Beauty standards and trends can evolve over time. How do you adapt to changing client preferences and the evolving concept of beauty in your work?

Do you see any patterns in how clients' aesthetic preferences have changed over the years?

Public Perception and Misconceptions:

How do you perceive public attitudes and misconceptions surrounding permanent makeup and other forms of body modification?

Have you encountered any challenges in educating the public about the benefits and risks associated with your work?

Documentation and the Field of Aesthetics:

In the broader context of the library and information field, how do you see the documentation of beauty preferences and body modifications playing a role in understanding human identity and self-representation?

Are there ways in which libraries and information professionals could contribute to the documentation of these aspects of human identity?

Future Trends:

What do you anticipate for the future of permanent makeup and aesthetic enhancements, both in terms of technology and client preferences?

How might the documentation of these practices evolve in the years to come?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with El Truchan

Conducted over Google Teams, September 2023 by Mary Helen Mack

Mary Helen Mack

So just to get us started, could you introduce yourself and provide some background on your work as an esthetician and tattooist specialising in permanent makeup?

El Truchan

I'm El Truchan, owner of Perfect Definition, Scalp MicroDefinition, Perfect Definition Academy as well. I've been tattooing now for... in November will be 10 years since Micro Definition I changed the profession.

Mary Helen Mack

Excellent. You used to work in Financials Correct?

El Truchan

Yes, I used to work in finance before that. And I was a stockbroker in London. Yes, for nearly a decade.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. And why sort of permanent makeup? And I saw on your website that you had gotten some done yourself? Was that sort of what started your interest? Or was it something else?

El Truchan

No, now I lost my best childhood friend to breast cancer and she was going to have a nipple and areola tattoo. That was way before I was even considering this profession. And we were talking about her having nipples and areolas tattooed once she finished with her mastectomies and healing and so on. She never made it. And that was, that was a long time ago. And I was having my permanent makeup procedurally by that time than for my own convenience when I used to work in finance. So, when she was explaining to me what she was getting done, she was referring to having similar procedure, how I used to get my eyebrows and eyeliner stand and lips and so on. So that's how I find out about their medical micropigmentation. But I wasn't in beauty or tattooing industry at that point, I was still in finance. And then when I was taking my mom for her eyeliner to be done at the same place where I used to get my one. I've asked some questions about the nipple and areola tattooing and the whole medical scope. And that's how I found out about it then made some inquiries. With only at that time, about three or four academies available in the UK, and went, trained, and quit my job after So, the training. So that was it.

Mary Helen Mack

So how long does it take to do all the training and was it quite intensive? Or was it something you were able to do alongside the finance?

El Truchan

No, I quit my job. So, I went straight in for it. So, the first week of beginners training was just for the cosmetic side for the permanent makeup on the face. And that was just the first week of the beginning training. So now the times are different. What was done then is very different now. We used to be trained properly, now not trained properly: technicians are trained one or two days and they are let out on general public. That's why you have so much more butchery going on around UK, with all the laser removals of the blue eyebrows and crazy, you know, you've seen at all I'm sure on the trains and so on, on the news, on Daily Mail, there's a lot of bad work being done. And because the industry is not properly regulated, proper training providers like there used to be, in my days, when we used to get trained for months at a time before we going to qualified, now those trainings are not really available, because everyone is providing to two days training. So, it's very hard to get the proper education, and it's a lot more expensive. So, everyone is just going for the cheap training.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I've seen a lot of those unfortunate stories online, even people that say, "Oh, well, I can pay for two days training, and then I can do it on myself. And I'll never have to pay to have this done again." And it's.... I mean, my advice to people asking, "what do you recommend knowing about tattooing like you do?" I

always say: never go cheap, always go for someone that has a lot of experience. And if you're thinking about "oh, I'll go with them, because they're cheaper," you will pay for it much later on,

El Truchan

Will cost you more because not only the treatment, but then the removal of the treatment and removals and several times. And they are expensive and they are painful.

Mary Helen Mack

So, and sometimes you can't even get everything completely, completely gone.

El Truchan

You can't and imagine being on your face. So, people are just not thinking well about the future of their wellbeing or their appearance quite often. They literally just go with a spontaneous booking and the price. Rather than doing new research. Society has changed a lot. We used to do research. So, anything that would be impactful on your body, on your appearance, anything procedural, where you have to have a broken skin or even go to the dentist you used to research the dentist before you went the first time, right? Or anything like aesthetics, doctors and so on, you would look for recommendations, for opinions for referrals for reviews. Now people just see something on the Instagram that is so Photo-shopped out of the oblivion, and they just go for it, like seconds spontaneous booking. It's crazy.

Mary Helen Mack

It seems to me like that may be a result of maybe some parasympathetic relationships, where ordinarily, you might as you said, go for recommendation, ask your friend, or anyone that you know if they recommend someone and now people see someone on Instagram, they go, "Oh, they're like a normal person, and they've said that they've had this done," not realising that maybe that influencer has been told to promote this, maybe they've never had this procedure at all. And of course, you as the viewer have never seen them in real life, so you don't even know if that is the real face. Filters are getting quite good. So, you might never know, but you feel like "I see this person online every day. So, we're like, kind of friends" even if they're an influencer and you're really just a fan. It's all advertising.

El Truchan

It would be hard for me to comment on that. I personally don't follow any influencers. I'm not influenceable person. I don't respond to social media the same way as a slightly younger generation does. Because I wasn't born with it. So, for me that was an acquired experience-- social medias. And I'm very skeptical because I can see it; I have eyes. I can see when something is filtered. If it looks too perfect, and it's like blemish free, gorgeous highlight that if it looks like a magazine picture. Of course, it's been photoshopped. Of course, it's been filtered. And of course, those people seek in their selling new procedures, products and so on. They have been paid for it. That's the job. That's why they on Instagram, on YouTube, on TikTok

all day every day. Because, not because they just enjoy in it. They are there to make money and they make it from sponsorships. So, to me that's blatant logic, but the younger population... I don't know why are so easily influenceable. It's almost like they haven't acquired any risk assessment capacities in their heads. And very naive also from that perspective. They spent so much time on social medias that reality got washed out from their daily lives because they don't go out and interact and look at people's faces in the same manner. You can see them sitting with each other and just looking at their phones. So, whatever they do in even the of course, circle of friends, they are observing them and they behaviour on their phones not face to face. So, because it's so skewed their reality to what they see all the time. I think they completely lost capacities of making logical, logical choices

Mary Helen Mack

It is a different world out there with all the social medias that there are. And then of course, everyone went through years of COVID where that was the only interaction was on screens and on phones and you couldn't be with people in person. Maybe now people maybe don't know how to react as much now that we're back.

El Truchan

I don't know. I don't think it's just COVID I'm sure. And the lock down --it's actually not COVID. COVID didn't do it. Lockdowns. COVID, it’s a virus, you know, same as flu,

Mary Helen Mack

very true.

El Truchan

Lock downs, it's a different story. Lock downs has caused a lot of mental illnesses. In all the lines of all generations. I don't think anyone has been immune to it. Even the most, or maybe I should say the least, social people even they got a little bit of a hard time because even for them the very inability to do anything at all became very, quite, damaging. So, I think we all got to have a kick out of it. And it's going to have a long the impact, long term impact on all of us. But I don't think it's just the lockdowns, I think it's just the progress of technology, of everything being so convenient. And then with just you and the device. So, you don't really have needs for real interactions anymore as much for physical interactions. Like think about shopping. When do you really ever go you know, like shopping for things like if you need something? You just order it from Amazon, right? Online. You don’t go to the shop, you don't interact with the person, you don't look at their face, their eyes or expression. We don't hear the accent of maybe someone from another country standing behind the counter. You order your food online as well from Waitrose, wherever, Sainsbury's deliveries, or maybe pop into the shop, but you don't go to the counter with self-checkout. So, you just pick things up and you scan it yourself and you leave. Okay, maybe you still work in a professional environment where you have to be somewhere in person in the office. But when you're in the office, what do you --do they interact with people, or are you on your device most of the time? Like someone in passing to get a cup of coffee and just say hi. So, a lot of standard human interactions go to remove to our observations of people, the real faces, and the real body shapes and you know, real skin colours and marks,

scars, freckles, it's really removed from So, our daily lives because everything is filtered or blurred out. Like even now on Zoom, we're both quite blurred out so we don't see each other's details so much. And when we are for example, interrupting on devices like zoom, general behaviour of people is not to look at the person that they speaking with, they actually look at themselves in their reflection of the screen, not their reflection, their projection. So, in the in the video of themselves. So that actually has brought another whole layer of ones for the procedures because people see themselves on the screen. They like "oh my god, you know, I need this. I need that" because they look at themselves rather than other people. So much. So, because they see themselves sound a lot. It's like spending the whole day in the mirror looking for faults on you.

Mary Helen Mack

So, I've read studies about that, where people have said that "oh yeah, after locked down, all the facial procedures went way up" because everyone had spent several months staring at themselves going "is that really how my nose looks?"

El Truchan

So plastic surgeons have been so busy with, yeah, noses, facelift, and wrinkle, the eyelids, and so on. Botox fillers, so everything is going through the roof because it's not healthy for us to be looking at ourselves so much. It's, it's not horrible. We never used to do that who sits in the mirror in front of the mirror whole day. Just looking at themselves. It's So, not healthy. We're supposed to be looking at other people in their natural environment. So, we can all see each other's as individual humans, rather than look for individual faults or try to make each other all the same and perfect and washed out and blurred out and perfected and shiny and super symmetrical. That's not previous human behaviour. And so, it's escalating. It's changing a lot.

Mary Helen Mack

So similar to sort of the social media thing, the trend cycle has really sort of picked up pace in response to social media. Throughout your career, do you see trends emerging with the sort of aesthetic procedures that people are seeking or have things been relatively consistent sort of people tend to seek the same things as far as permanent makeup.

El Truchan

So, because I've been doing permanent makeup now for 10 years, I see pretty much the same. Everyone needs eyebrows, because at some point in your life, something has happened. So, for example, one incorrect waxing or threading or couple of hairs pulled out a little bit out of the shape. And sometimes they don't grow back. So, because it's something that is perfectible in our daily lives, and for example, women, we also go through hormonal changes at different stages of our lives. That's medications that we may have taken. COVID jobs as well, which is a cause of hair loss. I don't know if you know about that side effect. A lot of people have experienced a lot of different things that affect their normality as it was. So, it's restorative treatments that are required for one reason or the other, but they always have been, because things like that, you know, hormonal changes for women and, you know, medications and so on, been

happening to us women, you know, throughout our whole lives and for generations as well. So that's not new. So, eyebrows always are the number one. Skullcap, similarly to eyebrows can get affected because it's something that, you know, it grows, it rejuvenates itself, it renews itself on a regular basis. Then we have the eyeliners, and lips. And those are more cosmetic needs just because it's easier. So, for example, finance industry, women just like to look natural, nice groomed, without having to worry about waking up an hour earlier, they get up early enough already to apply their makeup, and so on. So professional women looking for permanent makeup for eyes, eyeliners and eyebrows for those reasons. it's convenience. The trend remains the same for me, I don't tend to train kids, sorry, treat kids. So, by kids, I mean anyone around --no offence to anyone, but they are still very young adults-- anyone between 18 to 22, I don't tend to treat unless they have actual restorative need. Because their ideas, the trends, the wants, the desires change so much. And they are so young, and they are so beautiful at the time, they really don't need anything. So, it's not usually my demographic that I concentrate on, I'm concentrating on professionals that just need a little bit more convenient, plus medical and restorative procedures for those who actually lost something, and they feel they want to get it back. So, I don't follow trends either. So, you will never see me doing So, the crazy. The crazy block eyebrows that you might see in other places that are related to TV shows. So, I shouldn't be naming maybe but in the Only Way Is Essex or the other ones. They are, again, not my demographic. I don't believe permanent makeup should be created for short term trends. It's something that it's supposed to be natural enhancement rather than something very heavy. And that may require removal, basically, when your preferences change with next season.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. Very good. Was there ever a time when a client sort of came in and wanted something that you thought to yourself? "Ooh, that that sounds like something that they won't be happy with?" And won't yield the best result? And how did that turn out, if that's ever happened?

El Truchan

So, I'm really good at prescreening clients. So, when they make an inquiry to reserve, one of the first questions is, what is the treatment for and what do you wish to achieve? So, from that point, I can already assess if it's a person that I shouldn't be working with, or should I just let them go and find their own other sources. If it's something that I don't want to put my name on it? So, any piece of artwork I create on another human. Yes, it is their features, but it's my work. So, I don't want my art. I don't want my work. I don't want my name and reputation walking around and giving me bad name. So, I wouldn't create something that I wouldn't feel happy signing underneath, basically because those are my signatures. They're walking around with my So, name on their faces or on their bodies. So, if I don't agree that something should be done.

Mary Helen Mack

It sounds like you have now a very good method of making sure that it's not an "in the office," / "I won't do it" conversation. It's very much beforehand so that no one's time is wasted.

El Truchan

Yeah, absolutely. I So, always give honest advice, I, when I make an assessment, if it's something kind of realistic, I will explain. If it's something heavy, like, very, very artificial looking, I explained that this is not the type of work and I recommend having a look at the work that I provide, and maybe looking for the artists somewhere else that specialises in very heavy work. That is more So, like body art tattoo, rather than, than something natural, or like a gentle makeup looking. There are artists that do those things, of course, and they are boatyard the tourists that also provide services. So, you know, there is no hard feelings, I will always provide honest assessment. And if I don't feel comfortable doing something, I will just not offer the treatment.

Mary Helen Mack

Right. And so, what's your ideal outcome for someone that's seeking your services, like?

El Truchan

So, I like making people feel good about themselves. So, when I'm performing a treatment on someone, once the healed and everything is done, I want them to wake up feeling like themselves, like the good version of themselves. And yeah, just that, like remove a little obstacle or a little problem that has been bothering them in their daily lives. So, someone who's been waking up and looking in the mirror going, like, "Oh, my God, I hate my eyebrows, or, or my eyes are so droopy and small, my lips have no colour, no definition." And they keep seeing this little problem, and it bothers them, I like to remove it. So, they don't have to worry about that extra little thing every day, we all have enough to worry about. So, creating the little sparks of happiness, or convenience, I kind of would like that

Mary Helen Mack

Excellent. So going to the questions. In your line of work, you engage in various forms of body modification and enhancement. How do you perceive the concept of editing humans? And how does this relate to, in a broad sense, humans as a living document.

El Truchan

So again, the term of editing, I'm not sure if I would use editing outside, maybe restoring or improving their own versions of themselves. So, we very rarely changing, I don't really change the people that come in, I'm only matching to their needs of what they lost. And matching restorative needs or improvement. So small tweaks, some improvement of something that they've been bothered about. So, it is not, it's not a heavy-duty change. When it comes to medical side, that's always restorative treatments, it's something that a person has lost. So, it's almost giving it back to them something they have been missing. So, I don't know again, about the word editing,

Mary Helen Mack

Would enhancement be a better word?

El Truchan

So, for some people, it is enhancement, but for most people is already that's how they see that they see they should be. So, we're not really enhancing them. We're just matching to what their brain is expecting them to look like.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, so for some people, permanent makeup and aesthetic procedures are sort of documentation of their own beauty preferences-- trying to get back, as you said to something that they used to look like that they thought is maybe better than their current state trying to get back. How do you view this aspect of your work where it's sort of solidifying their preferences?

El Truchan

So yes, I mean, we all looking for, for something that, that makes us all to be happier and more comfortable in our own skin, right? So even in my own example, so I'm a receiver of permanent makeup. I've been now for many, many years, seventeen years if I'm correct, since I was 25, and working on the trading desk. So again, for So, convenience purposes, and for restorative purposes. The work, the work I provide is quite miniscule is just a small adjustment to match what your daily requirements are for being comfortable with yourself. We don't do again, heavy, heavy modifications. So, it's almost like trying to match your own vision of yourself. Yeah.

Mary Helen Mack

That leads me to my next question. Some people may seek this aesthetic sort of some edits or enhancements as a means of self-expression and empowerment. Can you share any examples of clients who have used your services in this way? And have you documented their experiences?

El Truchan

I don't provide those. So that would be modifications. So, some people like to, for example, stand out. And let's say, there are certain ways of expressing yourself when you belong to certain cultural groups, for example. Let's say you are goth, right, and to like super heavy, dark black. I make our black eyebrows black lips, and as a self-expression, you may want to have that tattooed on yourself. And that's absolutely fine, you can do that just not with me. I wouldn't agree to perform in such specialize a strong procedure, because I don't specialise in that. That's not my field of expertise. And I don't want to create something that I believe the person may be wanting to remove very shortly, when maybe their life changed a little bit, their career change, lifestyle, and so on. So, I always future proof my work.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay. But I would say, I mean, I would personally find it quite… maybe empowerment is not the correct word, especially for people that are experiencing hair loss, or putting on the eyebrows or getting sort of people feeling more like themselves as a result of your work. Because as you said, some of your work is getting back to how people perhaps were when they were younger, perhaps were before hormonal changes that have caused them to lose hair or eyebrows, or colour in their lips. I'm not sure what a good word for that would be-- not empowerment, but sort of taking back something that they feel like is theirs /was theirs.

El Truchan

Okay, so for example, I think a good example would be alopecia clients. So, the ones that lost their features completely either hair on the scalp, or, or eyebrows, and restoring those back, this can give them full confidence back into the practice. So yes, for those clients, that can be a completely life-altering, life-changing, it can restore their capacity of going out into the world and feeling comfortable around other people. And yeah, getting quiet their full social capacities as well. So, I had a lot of cases where those are slightly more medical, because they have an impact had a positive impact. So, it's almost like when you drop someone down into the oblivion, and then bring them back out, it's kind of had this this impact. So, impact can be really, really significant. Same with nipple and areola, restorative treatments, where women had the mastectomy performed, and they lost their, what they attribute to be feminine appearance, something makes us who we are, makes us women. And restoring those for them also huge, huge impact on our daily lives from ladies that have been telling me that they would never take the tops off in front of their partners anymore. And you know, just don't want anyone looking at them. And they don't even look at themselves in the mirror. Once the restoration is performed, they're getting their confidence back and their even their sexuality back. And they feel like they can be how they used to be before the loss. So those are heavy impact procedures. Yes, those are correct. Correct. Those restorative heavy impact procedures.

Mary Helen Mack

The nipple areolar thing is quite interesting to me, because every other procedure is on your face. It's something that the whole world at large, sees and interacts with, whereas that one feels more like it's just for the client or just for them and their partner. But it feels more like it sort of grants internal confidence in that way. Because it's not something that they're doing because they say, "well, this is something that I completely expect people on the street to see. I expect people to notice this about me," it's something that really only they are noticing, and being a part of. Does that feel more significant in a way, knowing that it's something a little bit closer, (literally close) to their heart but also creates a much sort of deeper, less external change?

El Truchan

Yes, and also for those women there is additional whole layer it's almost like a completion of winning against the cancer. So, it's almost like "fuck your cancer" literally like "I've got everything back you have taken nothing from me." So, for a lot of women, that's that final step because until then they still they still fighting because the customer still has taken something from them, but at the point when they get their nipples and areolas back, it's like, that's it, you're done. I'm back being me. Different me, but I am me and I have everything that I that I lost back again. So, I quite often hear that from my patients, once we complete

the treatment. They say like, yeah, now I feel like I did before. Like, I've got everything that I had before the cancer tried to take it away. So, it's a completion of their journey. And part of their actual, quite often, mental health recovery from the from the trauma as well.

Mary Helen Mack

That's really good. It's really nice to hear that people get such positive experiences out of these things. Because I feel like a lot of people think that sort of, when people say cosmetic procedures, they don't understand how impactful it can be on someone's life and wellbeing they think, "oh, it's wellbeing just beauty and beauty is not important," but I feel, it is quite impactful on someone's life and the way they feel about themselves. And therefore, the way they interact with other people and the world at large.

El Truchan

It can be very positive. Actually, some of those procedures can be so wellbeing positive to the receiver. So, I often feel from my clients, as they say, and that literally is head to toe, the treatment is like "I've got my confidence back, I feel me again," those are those are their words that literally I had repeated weekly for different types of treatments. Because they don't have to hide something anymore. They don't have to keep thinking and worrying about something that keeps bothering them. And yeah, for So, a lot of them. It's a completion of their journeys. So, for example, I don't know if you've seen it, I also do webbed toes, medical micropigmentation. So, we'll have the webbed toes, few web toes, so they are two toes fused together without a separator. Those clients, they struggle going out in sandals on the beach, anywhere where you have to expose your feet, because of their past unpleasant experiences, usually from childhood, where they were made aware of the difference from something else and quite often bullied or made fun of, this is heavy psychological impact. So, for those that I did perform their medical micropigmentation for web toes created the appearance of a separator in so 3D, so realistic. Just looks like normal toes, you would never notice anything that out of the ordinary. They go like "Oh my god, I bought myself five pairs of sandals, I never bought sandals, I'm going to the beach, we're in sometimes I'm showing my feet, I never showed my feet to anyone." You can make such issues psychological impact on something that has been there bothering them for a really, really long time. So again, it's removing and you know, negative out of their life and just giving them something to be feeling complete about and something another thing to worry less about that.

Mary Helen Mack

And you're not actually changing the toes in any way except for the external appearance. It's not like you're slicing them apart and actually separating the toes. It's just that that look of the thing is so important to people because it does, it's the one thing that bothers you. And if it bothers you, then you think about it, and then you go out into the world and you're thinking about it and less confidence. And what people really want, I think ultimately is that confidence to get over that small hurdle.

El Truchan

Yeah, feeling comfortable is so important, and you know, it's very impactful on your mental health as well. If you feel happy with yourself, you're generally a lot happier person. You don't So, get depressed as much.

Like, the causes of depression, if you look around, there are so many that are related to our appearance. And they start in really early now if the kids are bullied at school because they are different in some way to the others carrying that emotional baggage for their life for sometimes the whole life. So, for example, I'm very small. And, I'm from Poland originally. I'm short. It's not common, I stand out like a sore thumb. So, you can always So, spot me in the lineup. When I was growing up, I had the chip on my shoulder because of that because I will be picked out last for the sports teams and things like that. So, I have to find my way. I'm not easy to get into the depression and not easy to get bullied. You probably know from myself and others. I kind of worked out that if I'm lesser on something, I will make something else that I have so much more impactful; that will compensate for everything else. So just by being smaller, and you know, kind of almost locked out and invisible, I made sure that I was always performing on stages, being the speaker, like, even now a demonstrator, you know, because I'm small, I make myself look big. So, I will do everything to make myself look larger. So, it comes from a childhood as well. You know, it's one of those things: don't be small. So, you know, we all do this kind of thing. So instead of falling into the deep depression and pondering about it, a lot of people find no to solution. So again, if something makes me feel bad, I'm going to go and do something that will create the opposite effect and make me feel good. So, we all strive for something, we all want to feel happy, we all want to feel better. And none of us walking around want to feel crap about ourselves. Right?

Mary Helen Mack

Well, circling back, I think, 1. that's an excellent attitude to have, I wish more people had that attitude, because I feel like a lot of people wish they had that sort of response to things that they don't. Unfortunate. 2. And then circling back, I feel like nowadays, kids get bullied and stuff, but it's bit more intense, because you do have the social medias, like we were talking about earlier. So, if you do have the thing that people are making fun of you for, then you go online, and you think, "oh, maybe it's people just in my local community." And then you see there's some very toxic things online about, "oh, no, but you have to be this pretty to enjoy life. And you have to be this kind of thing." And you see some horrible things online like "a man's not a man if he's not over six feet tall" sort of things going to the height. I don't know if there's as rigid rules for women, but it's still like, "you have to be tall and skinny, and like a supermodel" and the so-called Instagram face, where it's like the super straight nose with the high cheekbones, and the big eyes, long sleek hair, but hairless everywhere else.

El Truchan

Images of the beauty of male and female how they should look like now. It's actually funny that there is there is some posts on internet for that ideal beauty was over the decades. So how was changing from Marilyn Monroe that was so curvy, and she had thighs and larger breasts and a bit of a belly.th And she was the desire of everybody, right, and then turning into going skinnier, skinnier straighter, and then back into Kim Kardashian. So that may be slightly exaggerated features. And again, it's always, always changing. But if you are stuck in that decade, and this is your norm, and especially norm build up so much by the social medias, and you are young impressionable person, in your teens, and you don't look anything like that, that can have heavy impact. And when I was growing up, we would okay, I would have maybe 20 kids at school, you know being bullies. Now you have the whole internet, one person post. So, imagine going to school when I was a kid, there would be 20 bullies. And that's all I would get the 20 bullies, they

were there, they would bully wherever. I'm not saying that that happened, I'm just saying that's an example. But now it's not 20 bullies, you start posts, and the thread continues and it keeps coming back. And it's nothing you can do about it because unless you delete your account, but you read in those comments, and then if it goes viral, you have thousands and thousands. And they are those trolls on internet seeking. They're literally spending their days attacking other people for their differences or abnormalities or jumping on the wagon of someone else pulling because it makes them feel better about themselves, you know being mean to someone else. Imagine being the receiver of that, not just buy 20 kids at school one day or a couple of times a week, if you happen to see them. They are online with you day and night because it's a whole world and it's almost like thousands of people can get hung up on you within 24 hours. The creeps. You reading those comments and people behind the keyboard are meaner and meaner than in person. Honestly, you know, in the past, okay, someone will call you fat or short or throw names at you, wherever. Now it's to the point like oh, you should go and kill yourself. You're so ugly. You probably seen comments like that and they are so impressionable. And they, if you hear it enough times, it will make you believe it. So that's why the mental illness of the of the young people growing up now especially those ones that are you know, standing out in some way from their… from the typical for whichever reason, you know, maybe social class properties skin colour, appearance, demographic and so on. It's heavy, it's so much heavier than what we use to experience before the social media, we had single digits, now we have thousands that are being sent on you as the impact. How do you handle that?

Mary Helen Mack

Well, so in the context of sort of aesthetic modifications, ideally, people would take these criticisms and then think to themselves, "but I'm comfortable in me, so I don't have to change for these people." Do you think, sort of moving into the future, and even now, are we seeing an increase in people seeking aesthetic treatments? Because they think, "Oh, well, someone told me that my eyebrows are weird, someone told me that my lips are too pale, or someone made fun of my hairline on the internet," do people sort of have that reactionary response?

El Truchan

Times more with more visible faces. So, for example, someone with a cleft lip, my contact because they feel that people are actually noticing those kinds of things, and maybe making comments or maybe they were recipients of bullying. People with alopecia, definitely, I've heard that from a lot of them that they were being made fun of. And one of the reasons for the enhancement with that with us is to give them back something so they can feel normal, and no one is attacking them in any way, or making fun of. Staring, for example, or doing something stupid to them, like tapping their head, it's like, "oh, you're bald," or something like that, to some of my clients, for those, yes, for general public that fits somewhere within you know, the average norm of, you know, appearances. Not so much that impactful. But for anyone with So, medical conditions or something that has happened accidental so on where the, the So, impact, the visual impact is heavier, yes, for those definitely. But we're going to see a lot more coming out looking for perfection from their teens into their young adulthood, because we can already see that so the youngsters that don't have a perfect nose, they're 18 and they already asking their parents to take them for you know, for the fillers or for the for the nose jobs, and they are only very young adults, and they already seeking those procedures to fit in, so that the impact is growing. And that whole demographic is maturing into the consent age. And

they will be coming out and looking for more, if it's small enhancements, and it makes them feel better about themselves and they really feel they need it and it impacts their mental health. Sure, but you always should come with an explanation and understand that they're not imperfect, they are perfect themselves. But if they really need a little bit of help to make them feel even better, that's fine. But we also have to be very careful as practitioners to know when to say no, because what we've seen emerging is also, it's been around for a long time, but it's emerging as well, is body dysmorphia, where people don't see themselves as they actually look as they are they constantly looking to change and perfect something but there is nothing else to perfect because there is no such thing there is no perfection. And they go into more and more and more extreme procedures, trying to achieve something that in their heads is perfection. But now they have crossed the line so much into the what should really be done to human body and human appearance that is within safe and ethical guidance, that the crossing those borders and practitioners should just say no, but a lot of practitioners say yes, and they continue.

Mary Helen Mack

I think unfortunately it is customer base and money. And that's quite a motivating factor for many practitioners is the money

El Truchan

Yes, but that's when ethics professional ethics come to. I think everyone who's a practitioner who works on other people should have some sort of education, professional ethics and when to say no. You know, like you see those very, very exaggerated people online for example, women with breasts.

Mary Helen Mack

Oh yeah, like the living doll aesthetic where they say, (even before the Barbie movie came out), they say I want to be a living doll. I want to be life Barbie with those proportions

El Truchan

The Barbie proportions are not too bad, but when is exaggerated to the point that it looks like a cartoon character. You know what I mean? The proportions are not human anymore in any way, shape, or form. At this point, maybe we should say no, but then again, you see their body modifications that are done for examples, scarifications. I don't do those kinds of things, but they are done. People for self-expression which we touched on earlier. So, scarifications or implants, for example, putting the two horns into your foreheads, because you want to express yourself as you know, a little devil or something like. So those are more, as I mentioned, like kind of trendy cultural, like goth, or you know, all these scarification trends and so on. So, they exist, and there are whole markets for it, and so on. So, there are places for those, but when it becomes to the point that it's dangerous, and the practitioners within cosmetic fields probably refuse it and may be referred to the outside of a cosmetic field when it becomes more of that body modification practice rather than cosmetic enhancements.

Mary Helen Mack

So, what ethical considerations do you take into account when discussing or performing permanent makeup procedures with your own clients?

El Truchan

In what terms?

Mary Helen Mack

Generally, what do you think are the ethical standards for someone that does your specific kind of sort of aesthetic enhancement is, you've already said that you screen people to make sure that they are doing something that is more subtle, more restorative. And so that could be a layer of that, because you might consider an ethical part of it to be not feeding into the trends not doing something too extreme that someone may regret even just a few years? Would you consider that part of sort of your ethical code even professionally or personally, when you work with clients?

El Truchan

Yes, restorations and enhancements are a yes, extreme procedures are a no for me. So, you kind of have to set your own cutoff line where you where you know, you're not crossing the border, and could cause future harm to your patient.

Mary Helen Mack

And how do you ensure clients are well informed about potential implications and outcomes of these procedures? Because I know, like with the lip, sometimes certain parts of it don't take as well. So that has to be informed. But I know you obviously do follow up procedures to check on the results yourself and make sure that anything, that maybe if there's a little patch or something on the lip that didn't take you make sure to correct that, how do you make sure sort of that you're managing expectations, and that people know what to expect from everything?

El Truchan

Yeah, so when we do the screening, before the clients even come in, we already include that as a part of the assessment. So, when we provide the questionnaire, and the clients feel that they need to see a medication that could cause potential effects on the field outcome, it's always mentioned other behaviours like upcoming sun, holidays, or other procedures. That's why we ask so thoroughly to see if there's anything that would cause any So, potential impact. And if it spotted further advice provided, so I spend a lot of time before the clients are actually entered entering the clinic, ensuring that the procedure is going to be performed with the highest safety standards and without any risks. So, we mitigate any potential risks by running the correct prescreening before the procedure. Also, we are advised that you know, it's a two-stage procedure each time, on average, that's the average person, sometimes that procedure is required. And if

there are any reasons that we find that could affect your treatment, you get informed right away, you know, because it will come out on your pre-screen. So, you are pre-informed. And also, when we send that pretreatment works, we have so much detail so much information that paperwork contains to make sure that once again, you are reminded of everything that you need to be aware of and consider how long the treatment fades and so on. What can be done if for example, you're not satisfied with your treatment, which actually is not also, the case with my procedures, because they are only restorative or small enhancements and nothing extreme. So, we already removing that risk at this point. So yeah, making sure that you communicate with the clients way before the procedures actually commerce. And you both on the same page as to what we expected.

Mary Helen Mack

Excellent. And so, I just have sort of one last question is: what do you anticipate for the future of permanent makeup and aesthetic enhancement, both in terms of any advancing technologies or client preferences? We talked a little bit about that as far as client preferences

El Truchan

Trends are changing. Certainly, I hope they don't go crazy. Again, the worst thing I could think of would be returned to skinny eyebrows because a lot of young women will damage the eyebrow hair follicles and of course I'm gonna have a lot more work to do. But this is not what we really want. We only want to work because we you know because we have to help, not because there was a stupid trend of destroying your own features or like plucking out all the eyebrows and just leaving the skinny line like women did in the 90s.

Mary Helen Mack

So many people from the 90s that just removed everything.

El Truchan

Oh my God, why? Why? Not on your face! I do understand the other parts of the body and I'm totally on board. Just not on the face, leave your eyebrows alone. They are important for expressing your expression, your expressions, expressing you, helping you expressing yourself. So, we I hope those trends don't go back. But also, the crazy trends. Again, I'm not a follower. So, my demographic is not from trends. But again, another layer of danger is that we'll be going through their heavy appearances, you know, the blob, giant caterpillars on people's faces, which will follow with a lot more laser removal requirements. So again, there is a whole industry catering just to laser removals because there is so many bad procedures or unnecessary procedures being performed, you know, someone has to take it down

Mary Helen Mack

The industry exists because the demand is there.

El Truchan

Yeah, exactly. So, yeah, that's, that's a concern. I hope those trends don't get in, don't kick in too much. But yeah, body modifications in terms of looking for perfection and uniformity of young people's appearance, that's a little bit worrying. It's not so much permanent makeup, to be honest, because we don't change the faces that dramatically. But the same nose is shaped the same cheek shapes, the same, you know, hairline shapes, and so on. Because it's so popularised by, you know, certain look on the internet and come in thousands, with filters, and so on, I think the younger generation is going to struggle, they're going to try to look very uniform to each other, which is not great, because we are all individuals, which celebrate our special thousands individual things, which, which makes us "us."

Mary Helen Mack

I think, as you said before, perfection doesn't exist. And I would argue to say like beauty as a singular ideal doesn't exist, either. There are so many iterations. And hopefully, we'll enter a world where everyone sort of acknowledges that instead of the Instagram face that all looks astonishingly similar. Alright, do you have any other sort of final thoughts, anything that you think might be relevant to the human body as a document? And? If not, that's the end of the questions for me.

El Truchan

Um, there is another factor process. So, this is something that we all go from on some point. And I think it's a little bit more impactful for women than for men. When ageing process thousands takes effect, it's hard to accept ourselves going through those changes. I know that from my own example, and I know that from my clients, for example, when you start seeing your body changing by your brain not accepting it. And it's, it's a whole another level of treatments that are catering for that demographic. They not sitting so much within my scope of work, they go more with a plastic surgeon. So, the facelifts and yeah, the heavier, heavier surgical work. So, it is something again, that could be considered because it also has a huge emotional impact on us when our bodies so disconnected from how we see ourselves, and the body goes in one direction, but we not seen that. I like for example; I don't see myself as my age group. I know what age I am. But in my head, I'm about 25. So how I see myself when I close my eyes, it's still about the image from between the 25 and 30. And I want to keep that. I don't want to go through the ageing process. I don't want to allow my body to fall into category of my grandma, if that makes sense. So, it is also something that we all have to look into because with celebrities and people see in TV, so not just online, but now it comes down a little bit more now. Further back into the past, watching TV and movies and so on. We see those beautiful actors and actresses and singers almost not ageing. They have money to do that. So, they have all those procedures to preserve them in that little snapshot of time where they looked at their prime. And we all, we don't want to let go of that either we want to be stuck there, like I want to be frozen at my age of 25 to 30. I'm way past that. But I'm literally non-stop looking for something to bring me back closer and closer to that group, as I'm going further away from it. And I think I think that became a quite Western cultural thing as well, you will notice, professional women, we all you know, and wrinkle creams and wrinkle treatments, facelifting, you know, jaw sharpening and so on. To looking for that something to lock

ourselves in, in that snapshot of time. So again, it's something that our brain has been doing for us. We, we don't want to age; in the... we need the Elixir of Youth that preserves us then keeps us close.

Mary Helen Mack

I think one example that I immediately thought of when you said that is Audrey Hepburn, she lived to quite an old age, but everyone only remembers her, the only pictures that you ever really see printed no matter what the article is, it's always "oh, here's a picture of her from when she was in her late 20s or mid-20s," even though she lived a whole life after the movies and was photographed, but everyone wants to keep her in this time capsule. And then actresses we have now. I mean, some of them still look astonishingly young. And when they're interviewed, they say, "Oh, I drink so much water. I go to the gym," but everyone knows they have a team of aestheticians behind 1000 tansy automatic procedures. Yeah, that doesn't get mentioned. But don't worry. It's just I wear sunscreen every day, and I drink my water. It's not the laser treatments, and it's definitely not the Botox.

El Truchan

Well, I can poke jokes, I frown and my clients think I'm angry at them that's concentration. So, I put the Botox in between my eyebrows just to stop looking angry when I'm just concentrating on what they are saying. So, yeah, and also to reduce the wrinkles.

Mary Helen Mack

I'm getting that a little bit at the moment, because when I'm concentrating, I also do the furrowed brow sort of screen.

El Truchan

So again, I don't consider that heavy enhancement. I consider that almost like getting my forehead to my normal state by my own brain in my own vision of myself.

Mary Helen Mack

It's not enhancement, it's maintenance.

El Truchan

Maintenance. Thank you. That's exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

Alright. Well, I think. Thank you so much for speaking with me. Have a nice evening and have a good conference this weekend that you're speaking.

El Truchan

Yeah, conference number two in the same week. That's heavy duty, but I like them.

Mary Helen Mack

You can do it. You say you want it to be big, tall and noticed.

El Truchan

I like sharing knowledge. I always did that anyway.

Mary Helen Mack

Excellent. Well, I certainly appreciate it. Thank you so much

INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH HERSHEY

Deborah Hershey, certified genealogist, is the CEO of Generations Remembered, a genealogical research company, and an active member of the Harrisburg Chapter National Society for the Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR/ DAR).

This interview provides valuable insights into the role of genealogy in documentation, the requirements and processes associated with DAR membership, and the importance of preserving historical records. Perspective on ethical considerations and the educational aspects of her work is explored within the context of the paper's goals.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction:

Can you please introduce yourself and provide some background on your experience as a certified genealogist and your involvement with the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)?

Genealogy and Documentation:

How do you view the role of genealogy in documenting and preserving family histories, especially as it relates to tracing one's lineage back to the American Revolution?

Can you discuss the importance of documenting evidence and sources in genealogical research?

DAR Membership and Requirements:

What are the specific requirements for DAR membership, and how do individuals typically go about documenting their lineage to meet these requirements?

As an officer and member of the Harrisburg DAR, can you describe your role in assisting others with the documentation and application process?

Patriot Ancestors:

Could you share some insights into the process of identifying and documenting the Patriot ancestor in one's lineage for DAR membership?

What resources and methods do you recommend for individuals who are researching their family history to find a Patriot ancestor?

Preservation of Historical Documents:

The DAR places importance on preserving historical documents and records. How do you and the organization contribute to this preservation effort?

Are there any specific initiatives or projects related to document preservation that you've been involved in?

Challenges and Rewards:

What are some of the challenges you've encountered in your genealogical research and documentation efforts, especially when working with others to meet DAR requirements?

On the flip side, what are the most rewarding aspects of helping individuals document their lineage and become DAR members?

Ethical Considerations:

When working with historical documents and sensitive family histories, what ethical considerations do you take into account, and how do they inform your approach to genealogy?

Are there any privacy concerns or ethical dilemmas you've faced in your work?

Future of Genealogy and Documentation:

How do you envision the future of genealogical research and documentation, especially with advancements in technology and access to digitized records?

Are there emerging trends or tools that you believe will shape the field?

Advice for Aspiring Genealogists:

What advice would you offer to individuals who are interested in pursuing genealogy as a hobby or profession, with an emphasis on effective documentation practices?

Is there a particular genealogical discovery or story that has left a lasting impression on you?

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Deborah Hershey

Conducted over Google Teams, September 2023 by Mary Helen Mack

Mary Helen Mack

So just to give a little background on what I'm doing, I'm investigating the human body as documents; both how humans can be thought of as living documents, and also how documentation affects human life and what we do, which is very big in genealogy, especially record finding. So, can you just start by introducing yourself and provide some background on your experience as a certified genealogist and your involvement with the Daughters of the American Revolution?

Deborah Hershey

Deborah White Hershey, I'm a nurse by training. I have been working in genealogy since 1974. And I have my own genealogy company called Generations Remember, but I'm also the verifying genealogist for the Wellcome society, which is people who came over to Philadelphia on the Wellcome ships of William Penn. And I'm a Registrar for my local chapter, the Daughters of American Revolution (DAR). So, I work on all of those applications and daughters do it for other people. For other organisations. I've helped people get into Mayflower society, Founders and Patriots, Sons of the American Revolution, Sons the Revolution, and a boatload of other organisations, I do a lot of lineage research.

Mary Helen Mack

Right? So those kinds of societies are not as prevalent in the UK. What do you think is the main benefit of joining such an organisation; what motivates people to look into this and join such societies?

Deborah Hershey

Well, the reason I got into it, because I'm a genealogist and I wanted to have one line at least officially recognised and documented. So, I joined the DAR back in 1980. And the value is to document our ancestors, some official organisation, and I think people join the DAR specifically because of, of our tenants. We work to preserve historic preservation, education and patriotic service and we work with veterans for patriotic service. Historic preservation: we help clean up cemeteries and so, put plaques up-- we want people to know what the So, importance of and where the sights are. And education: we do good citizens awards and literacy issues and women's issues. And so, for the DAR, there's a variety of issues. Not everybody that joins as a genealogist. So, as a registrar, it's my thing to do to help them get in to help them with their applications. But I think it's also.... DAR is the only women's only organisation, we, we have over a million members over the history of the organisation, we probably have, like 150-170,000 women actively belong.

Mary Helen Mack

Wow, it always surprises me how many people are involved, especially sort of in the era of things like 23andme-- where you can send in your DNA and find out your heritage? Do you think that finding your heritage more through this documentation is a little bit more personal than say, just getting your DNA results? Because then there actually is not just DNA and percentages, but names associated all the way up the lineage?

Deborah Hershey

Well, with DAR, the DNA testing has just come into being with the group in the last say, 10 years. But yeah, I think a lot of people are trying to connect through 23andme, FTDNA, Ancestry DNA, Living DNA, because in the UK, living DNA is probably one of the bigger ones. And I think when they find out who they are through their DNA, now they think it's more.... they get more interested in joining that lineage society to prove who they are. Because a DNA does not necessarily give you that connection, but it says, tells you "Wow, there's a lot of people out there that I'm related to that I didn't even know"

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah. From my personal perspective, it's makes me feel a bit more connected to have the documents all the way up, instead of just saying, "Oh, that's cool. I'm 43% something." I'm going, "Oh, then my grandma did this and this," especially because the DAR says, "do we have birth certificates, and marriage certificates and death certificates?" So, you sort of piece together individual stories, which is really a little bit what history is, it's storytelling. But this is a more personal way to do it than just the DNA. Do you think people start with the DNA and then they actually from there want to get even more into it

Deborah Hershey

I would say, a lot of people do not start with DNA. Well, I know how I got started, years ago: my cousin's had gone to Scotland. And because we had this family story that we were the McLean's of Duart, and we have a castle in Scotland. And so, I've set out when to prove that that's our castle, that we have that connection. And I think a lot of people find that start out with that with family stories. Another story I my aunt told me, "Oh, well, we are related to the Carson Long Military Institute," which is a private school, here in Pennsylvania. And so, I set out to prove that. The stories you get along the way.... as it turns out, Carson Long was 16 when he died, so we couldn't be descendants of the school. But I was introduced to a fellow who had been researching for my family for 40 years. And I find a treasure trove of information. So, it's the stories and proving the stories that is interesting for a lot of people.

Mary Helen Mack

How do you view the role of genealogy in documenting and preserving family histories, especially as it relates to tracing one's lineage to the American Revolution?

Deborah Hershey

How do I find it so important?

Mary Helen Mack

How do you view the role of genealogy in documenting and preserving the history?

Deborah Hershey

It's, it's the most important part. If you I do this, for a lot of people, I probably helped 200 or more, get into DAR. And a lot of times you find people say, "Oh, my grandmother just said she was in the DAR." Well, Granny might say she was but she never proved it. She never submitted an application. So, genealogy has to prove that -- to belong to these groups. And a lot of times the genealogy that's online and things, it's not accurate. So, genealogy has to...you have to collect the documents to prove these lines. That's what I do.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah. So that brings me directly to my next question: can you discuss the importance of documenting evidence and different kinds of sources? In your research?

Deborah Hershey

Oh, the importance of documents: that's, that's the only way you're going to be able to prove a line is if you find the documentation, and there are so many different sources. I go to historical societies, state archives. We're working on a project right now for my group, collecting Bible records. You know, a lot of families have old Bibles, and sometimes that's the only record of a birth or a death. And so, we're collecting those to put in the, the library in Washington, DC for the DAR. So other ladies from all over the world can access that those Bible records and find out or have proof for their, their lives.

Mary Helen Mack

I saw, I think it was on your website, there was even a section about finding pictures of Tombstones as a form of documentation, because sometimes, paper documents aren't existing so much so you have to find these alternative sources that maybe people don't immediately think of. But in a way, those are documents.

Deborah Hershey

Definitely. And sometimes that's the only documentation too. You'd be surprised what you find on tombstones. I just did a tour of our cemetery at my church; we turning 300 years. I know for you, in England, 300 is not so big

Mary Helen Mack

I'm still amazed. Because I grew up in Oregon, where as my husband always says... well he sometimes points to a building and goes "see that building? It's older than where you came from." But it blows my mind that the cemetery down the road, there's tombs from the 16 /1500s. And that's just very normal here to have cemeteries that are that old.

Deborah Hershey

Well, our church cemetery, the oldest burial there is 1735. And that's pretty much unheard of in a lot of areas in the United States. Because it's, you know, once you get out of New England, and Philadelphia and Virginia, it's not that old. And going west, if you cross the Mississippi, finding Revolutionary War patriots is very slim. Unless they travelled out there after the war.

Mary Helen Mack

I think my family, tracing the lineage, it's like a very slow migration, it was almost state by state, each generation just one more state to the west. Until finally everyone sort of ended in Oregon.

Deborah Hershey

Well, my family, my White family, I didn't think any of them moved out of Pennsylvania. Through DAR I found another patriot, and I started research and lo and behold, I one White family branch moved west to Illinois. And my husband and I do a lot of travelling, and we, we found the cemetery where they are buried, in Painted, Illinois, which is... it's one of those, you drive down a farmer's road to get there. Yeah, and I didn't think we migrated too much. But I'm finding now more and more that we did go a little bit West.

Mary Helen Mack

So, moving on to sort of my next section is a little bit more DAR specific. So, what are the specific requirements for membership? If you could just give a brief explanation and how do individuals typically go about documenting their lineage? Do you know if there's a standard starting point?

Deborah Hershey

Yes, well to belong to the DAR, you must be a woman, 18 years or older, and you must be able to prove direct descendance from a patriot. And a patriot can be from military service, from civil service, or patriotic service. And that's something like in Pennsylvania we had a Pennsylvania supply tax. So, if they paid their supply tax, they wouldn't have necessarily fought in the revolution, but they are considered patriots. And to start, a lot of people just go on the dar.org website and put into this system that I'd like to join. And I think this is my patriot. And so, then they are assigned to a local chapter and the good registrar's help them get in by helping them with their applications.

Mary Helen Mack

So, people would typically start out at least with some idea of who the Patriot is, not just, "I think I might be related to a patriot." People tend to start with an idea of a name, at least to start

Deborah Hershey

I would hope. I still get some people who get really mixed up with Revolutionary War and Civil War. They say, "I know, I have a patriot" and then they tell me when what the years are.... It's like, "no, that's not the right war". This is the American Revolution. This is back in the 1700s. But yeah, it's .... very hard to --and very time consuming--- if they don't have an idea who their Patriot is, because you're going down, back, now, at least 12 or 14 generations. Some of those older ladies are only go back eight or nine generations, but that's still a lot of digging to find a patriot.

Mary Helen Mack

So, can you share some insight on the process of sort of identifying and documenting the Patriots? Because I know there isn't just a stagnant list that we say "that's the list and it's over." I think every once in a while, someone new gets added. So how do we go about finding new people or identifying and confirming the Patriots?

Deborah Hershey

Well, we have new patriots all the time. And it's more than just the guys that fought it's, it's even if they gave oats for the horses and that kind of thing. So, the way to go about it: reading local histories, where did your family come from? Pick up a county history, and that they always tell of Revolutionary War patriots and look for names. A lot of times, if somebody.... I work with those that are hard to prove. So, how I do it, I use ancestry trees all the time. And I just start poking in what they know about their family and trying to look back through the names. I'll take a name back, like four or five generations, go back on the DAR website and see if anyone has already gone in on that name. And then just start looking for a person, a patriot that is already a member of the DAR who's gone in from your area. And just started eliminate, "okay, if they came in to the United States in 1850. Okay, that's not a possibility." But you look at the county guys and the ladies, because there's ladies who are patriots that paid the Pennsylvania supply tax. Or one of my favourite ones: I got a lady at the DAR on Lydia Dara, who was a spy. I think that's always kind of a cute story that she can prove that her ancestor was a spy for the favorite other side.

Mary Helen Mack

That is very cool

Deborah Hershey

Yeah, you do have to prove that they were on the right side of the war. They can't be a loyalist; they can't have deserted. So, you have to work through the names that way.

Mary Helen Mack

You've mentioned ancestry trees, are there any other specific resources or methods that you think would be really good for anyone researching their family history?

Deborah Hershey

The Latter-Day Saints have familysearch.org. And that is... they have gone out and collected copies of millions and millions of records. And it's not all indexed. So, you have to sort of dig through those but the records that they have is phenomenal.

Mary Helen Mack

I think my granddad did a lot of my family research-- where I got all of my family documentation. My mom said that he was a hobby genealogist but was also a lawyer, very much into research. And she said, "Oh, yeah, maybe once a year he would take a trip to Utah just to research in their libraries because they were so good."

Deborah Hershey

I've visited the library a few times. And another really good source is the Allen Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. They have a huge genealogical collection, and probably are only second to the Latter-Day Saints out in Utah. Yeah, I've been there that is that place is amazing. They have things back into the mountain where they store a lot of the records. And they are the number one for storing and getting records and documentation. But like I said, sometimes you have to really dig on their website, because if you just put in a name, there will be records come up. But a lot of times, it's because somebody has joined the church and part of their religion is to document their lineage. But you don't want to stop with just putting names in you want to search into the records for them.

Mary Helen Mack

Feel like it's one of those little rabbit holes. That's a good place to start, but you have to keep going down.

Deborah Hershey

Exactly, exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

Okay, so as far as when organisations like the DNR get copies of these documents, they place importance on preservation of those documents and historical record. How does the organisation contribute to preservation efforts? And are there any specific initiatives that exist or that you yourself are involved in?

Deborah Hershey

Well, I'm the Historic Preservation Chair for my chapter. And really, once you submit, they have everything on computer down at national, but they have a huge library also. And a lot of things are on microfilm and things. And part of our job is to collect those documents and send them to national. Like, I'm working on a project with the Bible records as I said before, we have.... this is the second group. We found 12 Bibles in just our membership, that they have their family Bibles. So, we document them and we send you down over the almost 250 years. Yeah, 250 years... They have collected, ladies went out to cemeteries and documented cemetery records of tombstones. I've read the tombstones and sent them and so they have a big storage area that they have things on microfilm and computer and things and that kind of thing. But they do have a big library too with a lot of.... you can contribute books to and we have done that. Because the chapters will write books and submit them to DAR national.

Mary Helen Mack

I would say in the overall sort of library and information sphere, which is what this paper is for, there's a huge movement for digitization and getting everything on chips and computer. So, in addition to microfilm, is there any kind of digital database efforts?

Deborah Hershey

Oh, yeah, well, yes. So, when you submit an application to national, they scan all the documents into the computers so that they're there and you can pull them up. It depends on your access to the image access. Because I have a state and a national position, I can see those documents. You can't print them, you can order them from national, but they're all on computer. And so, if you want, if you find one of your patriots, you can see the applications those are on. But private information is blocked, so you can't see birthdays of people who are still living, that kind of thing. And you can't see records of those, you know, you can't see their birth certificates, that kind of thing. But you can see all the other documentation. And if you find that there's a patriot that's already been proven that is yours, you can order those documents from national and you can use those to prove a patriot for yourself.

Mary Helen Mack

Excellent. What are some challenges that you encounter in genealogical research and documentation, especially when working to meet requirements for an organisation?

Deborah Hershey

Well, you'd be surprised how many people there are they have the same name, even when they're.... I'm working on one right now that the Patriot's name is Christian Muscleman and in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. There are a lot of Christian Musclemans, and you have to sort out which one is the one that belongs to your family and find documentation to prove it. The beginning of DAR, they didn't necessarily use good proofs. So now we've really tightened it up, and it's really challenging sometimes to find the documents that mean: it looks like it's proof to me. But when it gets to national and the genealogist who

doesn't know the family who doesn't know, that record, looks at it, you have to be able to convince them that this is actual proof. That's, that's true.

Mary Helen Mack

All right, excellent. So, on the other side, what are the most rewarding aspects of helping people get through this process? And helping them find the documents in the lineage and being able to prove it absolutely?

Deborah Hershey

To me, it's like I'm some kind of detective doing an application. I stay up half the night sometimes, because I just got to find that last proof to document this for someone, and that that's what I find rewarding. And it makes other people very happy to be able to document their families and to proceed their family story and current and that that's what keeps me going.

Mary Helen Mack

It would be very satisfying just to solve the mysteries, and you're like, "yes, it's all coming together."

Deborah Hershey

Well, yes exactly. I just had a Eureka the other day on like, I just got it done and proved the whole way back for this lady. So, it's just a matter of getting her signature on the application and sending it to national, and hope that they So, agree with me.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. So, you'd mentioned a little bit about sort of not showing dates involving living people. So, I want to talk a little bit about ethical considerations in working with historical documents, possible sensitive family histories, with either people that are currently still living, or people that have deceased. So, what ethical considerations do you take into account? And how do they inform your approach to genealogical research?

Deborah Hershey

Well, I feel like people have to trust me that I'm not going to spread their personal data around. But that's mostly the things that you use beyond the first three or four generations as public information. I use Ancestry an awful lot, and most all the things I can get off of Ancestry. So ethically, I don't think when you have these documents that are public, in public view, that you need to worry so much. It's just the ones... are the people still living? that, you know, we don't share. If they're giving it to me, then I feel it's that's it can be used on their applications.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. Are there any privacy concerns or ethical dilemmas you faced recently? Or is it not very dilemma intensive?

Deborah Hershey

Well, you'll get some people who want to know "why do they you have to know my, my father's information" or you need to put down ex-husbands and that kind of thing. And sometimes they're not forthcoming. But to me, what I do is, if they don't want to give me that information, that's fine. I will just leave that off an application. And if they have children, that want to join the children, the American Revolution or the or the DAR, I'll leave it up to the next generation to get that information. In dilemmas, you find people sometimes that don't want to share their information, or we have sometimes kids --who went through the 1970s--- their birth comes before their parents' marriage, and you have to....

Mary Helen Mack

when the dates don't quite line up...

Deborah Hershey

Yes, exactly. Well, you know, that's the 70s that happened, and that still happens and people have children and then get married and you have to document that information too. That that's actually the parents.

Mary Helen Mack

Right. How do you envision the future feature of genealogical research and documentation, especially with so many advancements in technology and access to digital records?

Deborah Hershey

I see it being able to prove more and more. The downside is, like on Ancestry, I always say "do not believe the family trees that you see." Because some people just go on and connect the dots that are really not.... shouldn't be connected.

Mary Helen Mack

As you said, a lot of people have the same name and sometimes mistakes happen where you go, "Oh, yeah, that person, that person, they're the same."

Deborah Hershey

I have an ancestor Ziba Moore. How many Zibas could there be in this world? Well, there were four. And some people connected his wife to his nephew. And you just have to, I always say, look at the dates, do the math. You have to really do the math and a lot of times-- could that lady have had a child at 10?

Mary Helen Mack

I think the world record is 9, so maybe???? but no, not likely.

Deborah Hershey

Not likely; you probably have the wrong person. How could you be married to somebody that was born after...? Yeah. Like being connected to his nephew? That's the math doesn't work there. No. You have to, you have to do the math.

Mary Helen Mack

So, I think, what I'm also hearing is just "be careful," especially when connecting two things together, because people do have the same name. Even when you do think "that's a name that's not very common, I'm sure that that's the only one."

Deborah Hershey

And if you're working with family names like mine, I have White and Brown, Bell, Shoemaker.... You would think that wouldn't be such a hard name, but there's 25 different spellings that we're aware of for Shoemaker. And if you pull it up on... if you search on Shoemaker, you're going to get every shoe maker in the world who made shoes.

Mary Helen Mack

It's true. Also, with so many spellings I mean, at least I would think a consideration might be: you have to see if the spelling's match, but equally, someone who is the same person could be under multiple different spellings if say, a clerk wrote it down slightly wrong, or it got misspelt in some kind of transcript. So just because it's not spelled exactly the same doesn't actually mean that it's not the same person.

Deborah Hershey

Exactly. And I get a lot of times when I'm talking to people about their genealogy that, "well, that's not the way my family spells it." Well, that's the way it not the way you spell it, but that's the way they spelled it.

Mary Helen Mack

And that's the way the guy that did their marriage license spelled it when they said it out loud....

Deborah Hershey

Exactly. And I, I've really gotten stuck a few times with, I was looking for the name Wherry W H, E, R, R, Y. And I tried every combination of letters and ways to spell it. I finally called one of my genealogy friends and said, "Hey, can you take a look at that," and she founded under H U R Y? From W H E R R Y, and I don't know how she found it. But...

Mary Helen Mack

I mean, I'm sort of picturing that in my head-- how it looks-- and I'm going "okay, I could maybe see the Es becoming a U if someone wrote in cursive at some point, and then transcribed it... and it didn't go well...." But that is it's quite a leap. And then for those two: they're so different, but they are the same, same person.

Deborah Hershey

Well, we were able to prove that it was the same person and they were able to join the DAR, that patriot

Mary Helen Mack

Right? So, we're getting near the end. So, I'll just ask what advice do you have to offer for individuals who are interested in pursuing genealogy as a hobby or profession? With an emphasis on effective document practices. We've covered it a little bit-- I think just being careful and not connecting things that you're not absolutely sure are connected

Deborah Hershey

And do the math! That's probably the number one thing that I emphasise is: you got to do the math to make sure you have the correct time periods and stuff. To get started, just start with yourself and write down what you know-- your name, your parents, your grandparents, and then start looking for documents-- birth certificates, death certificates, marriage license, Bible records, and just start writing it down. And Ancestry is my go-to, because they will help you find documents, but you have to be sure to read the documents, and make sure that that is a connection before you connect the dots.

Mary Helen Mack

So, besides Ancestry are there any other emerging tools that you think this is really going to shape the field a bit more? We touched a little bit on DNA at the beginning, do you think that will have a big impact? Or do you think it's more about the documentation?

Deborah Hershey

Well, DAR allows you to use DNA, but they have very strict rules. And I think for good reason, because DNA can show you, but that doesn't necessarily document your connection, especially if you're using women, because women change their names. And that makes it very difficult. And the thing is, I have a lady who just sent her papers, and she changed her name from what is on her birth certificate. And all of her records, she totally changed her name. And you have to find something that proves that name change. And I just found another one I'm working on and I have to get in touch with the lady because they changed the name totally; it was Williams and now they're Chilcott.

Mary Helen Mack

Quite so.

Deborah Hershey

Yeah, it's quite a change. Well, I have a cousin who changed his name, and it was Shoemaker and he went to Palmer. You know, you have to find documentation; that is important. And DNA helps you get you know, where you want to go. I mean, as far as, "am I really related to this person." But it doesn't give you the documentation in between.

Mary Helen Mack

So, I would say sounds like DNA is more of a place to start, but not necessarily the thing on which to build the foundation of any of this application or any of this evidence.

Deborah Hershey

Exactly. I've done DNA testing for a number of different companies, and it's, it's not always helpful. I did FTDNA and they said "we're descended from Ashkenazi Jews. Well, as far back as I can find, my ancestor were Presbyterians. And, that's FTDNA, and a lot of the names were from the Slavic areas. And with all my research, all my ancestors are German, English, Scottish, Irish. So, I don't know where all that comes from, but they explained it that FTDNA is 10,000 years back. And Ancestry I think is like 5,000 years back? Well, you can't prove the records, though, they aren't there to prove that. So, I can get back to the 1600s. But that's not 5,000 years. So, DNA gives you something, I think 23andme is helpful, because it does help you connect the dots more recently, and perhaps we can find records to prove that.

Mary Helen Mack

Yeah, I'd say, circling back to what we said at the beginning, it's a bit more personal and a bit more provable, just because you actually have names to information, not just a general "Oh, yeah, we're from Germany, maybe? Or at least that region." That was something I was questioned a little bit about the DNA websites where it said, "Oh, it says I'm X percent from all these countries." Well, those lines get redrawn and they've, especially in the past few hundred years because of World Wars, boarders are moving. So, when do they

determine what time period is the "Oh, yeah, we're from Germany." But, you know, a few years before that, that wasn't Germany. That was a country which no longer exists or something.

Deborah Hershey

Yes, exactly. Exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

So, documentation sounds much more solid.

Deborah Hershey

It's key. You have to, you have to. And these people who say they can trace back to Charlemagne; I'd like to see that information that you have that proves that.

Mary Helen Mack

I've heard that quite a bit. I think my mom says that about our family. And we have got the documentation, I think, back to the Mayflower, but nothing from before that.

Deborah Hershey

Yeah. And you just wonder how some of these people do that, because I've gotten stuck back with my, like my fourth great grandfather, I can't find his parents, and I know where he's from. I just can't find his parents or any documents that prove his parents. And he was, he was born in the late 1700s. So how are these people finding documents

Mary Helen Mack

all the way all the way back

Deborah Hershey

Exactly. Now, I mean, the English are great, because they have all the document, and all the kings and the queens and stuff. But if you weren't a king and a queen....

Mary Helen Mack

Oh, if you were just some So, peasant farmer, probably not a great deal of records.

Deborah Hershey

Exactly. And not everybody are kings and queens, barons, and that kind of thing.

Mary Helen Mack

Right. I think that, that's all my questions are, do you have any other final thoughts or anything about the subject of humans and documents-- in any way they intersect?

Deborah Hershey

Really, just find the documents that prove it. Because you can't just take anything on a family story. There's probably some truth to it, but...

Mary Helen Mack

But that's only a place to start--before you start researching.

Deborah Hershey

Exactly, exactly.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. I very much appreciate it.

Deborah Hershey

You're welcome. Tell Kate I said, Hello.

Mary Helen Mack

All right. Thank you so much. Have a nice day.

APPENDIX IV: COPY OF ETHICS FORM



CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS/INTERVIEWEES

Title of Study: The Human Body as Document

Researcher: Mary Helen Mack Last
Affiliation: City University of London

Introduction:
You are invited to participate in an interview as part of a research study conducted for a Master's dissertation at City University of London. The purpose of this study is to investigate humans as document. This consent form is designed to provide you with information about the study and to ensure that you understand the nature of your participation. Please read the following information carefully before deciding whether to participate or not.

Procedure:
If you agree to participate, you will be scheduled for an interview session at a mutually convenient time and place, likely online via Zoom or teams. The semi-structured interview will last approximately 1 hour and will involve a series of questions related to human bodies and documentation and documentality. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and to aid in the analysis of the data. If you request, your identity can remain confidential throughout the study, and any identifying information will be removed or anonymized in the final report. The interviewer will ask for affirmative confirmation if you are comfortable to forgo confidentiality (and such permissions may be rescinded at any point in research/ prior to publication)

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the university or any other organization or individual involved in the study.

Confidentiality:
Confidentiality is of utmost importance in this study. All information obtained during the interview will be stored securely. The data collected will be used solely for academic purposes and will only be accessed by the researcher and authorized personnel involved in the research.

Benefits and Risks:
While there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, your involvement will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS). The risks associated with this study are minimal, and any potential discomfort related to discussing certain topics will be minimized to the best of our ability.

Questions and Concerns:
If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation, you are encouraged to contact me, Mary Helen, at Mary.Mack@city.ac.uk

Consent:
By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form. You voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and grant permission for the audio recording of the interview.

Participant Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____
Date: _____

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

Mary Helen Mack Last
MSc Candidate, Library and Information Science
City University of London
Mary.Mack@city.ac.uk
Missmaryhelenmack@gmail.com

[Signed copies of this document were obtained for all interviewees]