

# Tattooing and the Expression of Irish Identity

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## Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the role of tattooing in constructing, negotiating, and expressing Irish identity, drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of constructivist identity and semiotic theory. Tattoos are examined as powerful cultural markers that reflect the dynamic relationship between personal experience and collective heritage within the contexts of Irish history, religion, and the diaspora. Hall's constructivist theory posits that identity is a fluid and ongoing process, shaped by personal, historical, and cultural forces. This framework provides the basis for understanding how tattoos act as both personal expressions and public symbols of Irishness, embodying historical narratives, religious beliefs, and national pride.

The first chapter introduces Irish identity, providing the foundation for understanding how tattoos, as permanent marks, serve to connect individuals to their heritage while also allowing for contemporary reinterpretation. The second chapter delves into political tattoos, analysing how symbols such as the Celtic cross and images commemorating the Easter Rising or the Troubles serve as expressions of national identity and political allegiance. The third chapter shifts focus to religious tattoos, exploring how spirituality and Catholicism intertwine with national identity, particularly in an increasingly secular Ireland. The final chapter examines the Irish diaspora, showing how tattoos bridge geographical and emotional divides, allowing individuals abroad to maintain a tangible link to Ireland.

This thesis demonstrates that tattoos are more than aesthetic choices, they are tools for cultural preservation, self-expression, and identity construction. The act of tattooing, in this context, becomes a dynamic process of engagement with the past, present, and future of Irish identity, ensuring its ongoing evolution across generations and borders.

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## Introduction

Samuel O' Reilly, the son of Irish immigrants in America, invented the electric tattoo machine in 1891 and revolutionised the tattoo industry. More than 130 years later, tattoos are more common than ever. There are many reasons why people choose to get tattooed, often for aesthetic or commemorative reasons. However, tattoos that represent national identity are the focus of this inquiry.

This thesis examines the ways in which tattoos are more than just decorative body art. It looks at how tattoos can articulate identity in a profound and permanent way, linking personal experiences with broader cultural and historical narratives. Tattoos a medium for storytelling, a means of connecting the past with the present, and a way to navigate the complexities of identity in an increasingly globalized world. Irish identity, as expressed through tattooing, is not a singular or fixed concept, but a living, evolving construct that reflects tradition, culture, history, politics, and personal experience. As the body becomes the canvas for these narratives, tattoos serve as powerful tools for identity construction, allowing individuals to embody and communicate their Irishness in a deeply personal and public manner.

Stuart Hall's constructivist theory of identity asserts that identity is not a fixed, static concept but one that is constantly shaped by personal, historical, and cultural forces, providing a lens through which to understand the significance of tattoos in Irish culture. Identity, according to Hall, is a dynamic and multifaceted construct that is continuously being negotiated and redefined through interactions with broader social, political, and historical contexts. Tattoos, as deeply personal forms of expression, allow individuals to embody and perform aspects of their identity, reflecting both personal and collective meanings. In this way, tattoos serve as a powerful means of communicating Irish identity, from the traditional to the contemporary, across generations and geographic boundaries.



*Fig. 1: Iconic Dublin tattoo artist Johnny Eagle's studio (Fallon, 2017)*

For centuries, tattoos have been used across cultures and societies to mark rites of passage, express belief systems, and reflect social, political, and cultural affiliations. In the case of Irish identity, tattoos have emerged as a powerful medium through which individuals connect with their heritage, express their national pride, and navigate complex cultural and religious landscapes.

Semiotics, as outlined by Thomas A. Sebeok, reveals how tattoos can function as signs, indexes, or symbols encoding political, religious, and national identity. Hall's constructivist approach emphasizes that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through representation and discourse. Tattoos, as visual markers, construct identity by referencing historical events, religious beliefs, and cultural heritage through a variety of symbols and icons. By integrating this framework, this study examines how Irish tattoos serve as evolving expressions of self, community, and memory, reinforcing or challenging traditional notions of Irish identity.

The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of Irish identity, examining the historical and cultural narratives that have shaped what it means to be Irish. Irish identity has always been fluid, constantly evolving in response to social, cultural, and political changes. In contemporary Ireland, the concept of Irishness is often tied to both heritage and modernity, with individuals balancing personal experiences and collective histories. Tattoos, as a visual and permanent medium, offer a unique way to reflect on these shifting dynamics, providing a tangible link between past and present.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on political tattoos, exploring how tattoos are used to commemorate significant moments in Irish history, such as the Easter Rising and the Troubles. Political tattoos often reflect a commitment to a cause or a memory of a significant event, serving as both personal markers of identity and collective symbols of resistance, pride, and solidarity. Tattoos that commemorate these political events are not simply representations of personal beliefs, but are layered with cultural and historical significance, reflecting Ireland's tumultuous political landscape.

The third chapter turns to religious tattoos, examining how Irish individuals use tattooing to express their faith and spiritual connection to their heritage. In Ireland, religious identity has long been intertwined with national identity, with Catholicism playing a central role in the shaping of Irish culture. However, contemporary Ireland is becoming increasingly secular, and religious identities are more complex, reflecting broader societal changes. Religious tattoos, such as the Celtic cross or depictions of the Virgin Mary, are not only expressions of personal belief but also markers of cultural identity, intertwining spirituality with national pride.

Chapter four expands the focus to the Irish diaspora, examining how tattoos serve as a means of preserving Irish identity. The Irish diaspora is vast and varied, with millions of Irish people and their descendants scattered across the globe, particularly in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. For many members of the diaspora, tattoos provide a tangible link

to their homeland, allowing them to maintain a connection to Ireland despite the physical distance. This chapter will explore how tattoos serve as expressions of Irishness, examining the symbols and designs that resonate most strongly within the diaspora community.

By exploring the intersections of tattooing and Irish identity, this thesis will contribute to our understanding of the ways in which body art serves as a tool for cultural preservation, political expression, and personal storytelling. Tattoos, as both art and identity, offer a unique view into the ways in which individuals engage with their heritage, understand their sense of belonging, and construct their identities.

This thesis will show how tattooing, as a practice, reflects the fluid and ongoing process of identity construction, particularly in relation to Irish history, religion, and the diaspora. In doing so, it will demonstrate how tattoos are more than just marks on the skin; they are living expressions of culture, history, and identity, constantly being rewritten and reinterpreted through the experiences of those who wear them, thereby demonstrating the intangible nature of Irish identity and cultural heritage.

## Chapter One: *An Chéannacht Éireannach (The Irish Identity)*

### Cultural Identity

Cultural identity theory, as discussed by Stuart Hall, examines how identities are constructed within specific cultural and historical contexts. Hall's essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), provides a critical framework for understanding identity by emphasizing the fluid, dynamic nature of identity rather than seeing it as fixed or essential. He discusses two methods of understanding identity: essentialist and constructivist.

Essentialist, or static identity sees cultural identity as a fixed essence shared by a collective group. It emphasises a "one true self" that is rooted in history, heritage, and tradition. This view assumes that identity is unchanging and comes from shared ancestry, language, and cultural practices. However, Hall criticizes this approach for oversimplifying the complexities of identity and ignoring the ways it evolves over time.



Fig. 2: High Cross at Linguan, Co. Tipperary ([linguanvalley.ie](http://linguanvalley.ie), 2020)





Fig. 3: Harps decorated with Shamrocks, made by John Egan (Hurrell, 2020)

The High Cross pictured above demonstrates fixed identity. Not only is it a solid stone carving fixed on Irish soil, but the High Cross has become a symbol of Ireland and the Irish religious experience. John Egan's harps are also an example of fixed identity, as the harp is a recognized symbol of Ireland, featured on coins, passports and the Guinness logo. These harps are decorated with shamrock motifs, which also connects to the Irish religious experience, along with being a symbol of Ireland globally.

Hall's preferred view, however, is a constructivist perspective, arguing that identity is not fixed but rather a process of continuous negotiation and change. He believes that identity is not something we have, but something we perform and construct through interactions with others and our cultural environment. Hall's theory is deeply connected to diaspora studies. Diaspora communities negotiate hybrid identities, blending elements of their original culture with those of where they emigrated. (Hall, 1990)

*"Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."* (Hall, 1990)

In the context of Irish identity, essentialist identity might manifest as a strong connection to Gaelic culture, the Irish language, Catholicism, and symbols of the Celtic cross. These symbols and practices are deeply rooted in Irish history and tradition. However, following Hall's assertions, Irish identity is more than history, but how culture has adapted due to globalization and modern political movements.

Irish identity has been constructed, reconstructed and transformed through historical narratives, diaspora experiences, and media representations. For instance, how Irish identity developed in opposition to British colonial rule. Symbols like the harp, shamrock, and Irish tricolor became markers of resistance. It has also been both adapted and adopted by contemporary influences, such as European integration and American pop culture. For Irish emigrants, tattoos featuring Celtic symbols or Irish phrases could express a longing for their roots. While there is a degree of an essentialist view of identity, Irish identity naturally has a constructivist quality.

## **Semiotics**

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides a valuable framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated. As Thomas A. Sebeok explains in "Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics" (2001), a sign is anything that conveys meaning, from words and gestures to images and objects. Sebeok builds on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, distinguishing between icons, indexes, and symbols.

*"Human intellectual and social life is based on the production, use, and exchange of signs and representations. When we gesture, talk, write, read, watch a TV program, listen to music, look at a painting, etc. we are engaged in sign-based representational behaviour. Representation has endowed the human species with the ability to cope effectively with the crucial aspects of*

*existence knowing, behaving purposefully, planning, socializing, and communicating.” (Sebeok, 2001)*

An icon is a sign that resembles what it represents, relying on visual or auditory similarity. In the context of Irish identity, an image of the harp, an emblem closely associated with Irish culture, functions as an icon because it visually resembles the real instrument and evokes Ireland’s musical and national heritage.

An index, on the other hand, has a direct, causal, or physical connection to its meaning. For example, an image of the GPO in Dublin, the site of the 1916 Easter Rising, serves as an indexical sign of Irish political history. The GPO itself is not just a symbol of nationalism but an actual location where a defining moment in Ireland’s fight for independence occurred, linking the image directly to the historical event.



*Fig. 4: The ruins of the GPO in 1916 (Keogh Brothers, 1916)*



A symbol is a sign whose meaning is arbitrary and determined by cultural convention rather than resemblance or direct connection. The shamrock, for instance has significance derived from historical and cultural narratives rather than any inherent property of the plant itself. An image of a shamrock can represent Irish pride, national identity, or even religious heritage due to its association with St. Patrick. Unlike an icon, which visually resembles its referent, or an index, which has a tangible link, a symbol like the shamrock requires cultural knowledge to be understood.

In the context of tattooing, semiotics reveals how body art functions as a system of signs. Irish tattoos, whether political or religious, act as symbolic markers of identity, heritage, and personal belief. A tattooed Celtic cross, for instance, is not merely decorative; it operates within a shared cultural code, signifying faith and Irish ancestry. Likewise, tattoos commemorating events like the Easter Rising serve as visual narratives, encoding historical memory and political allegiance.

In the following chapters I will discuss and analyse Irish political, religious and diasporic identity in relation to tattooing, as well as providing examples of artwork using a framework of semiotics and Hall's identity theory to demonstrate how Irish identity is expressed through tattoos.

## Chapter Two: *Tatú Polaitiúil na hÉireann (Irish Political Tattoos)*

### Political Identity

In "History and Irish Nationalism" (2011), Richard English explores colonialism and nationalism in Ireland, emphasizing how colonial rule shaped Irish political identity. He argues that British imperialism was not just a backdrop but a central force that influenced the rise of Irish nationalism. One of English's key points is that Irish nationalism was both reactive and proactive. It reacted against the injustices of British rule, such as economic exploitation and cultural suppression, while also actively constructing an identity rooted in historical narratives, Catholicism, and the Irish language. Figures like Daniel O'Connell and later the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising framed their struggle as part of a broader anti-colonial movement, aligning Ireland's fight with global decolonization. (English, 2011)

The Easter Lily is a recognized symbol of Ireland, worn by Irish republicans in remembrance to those who died during the Easter Rising. The flower consists of green, white and gold, mirroring the tricolour flag that represents peace between Catholics and Protestants.



Fig. 6: An Easter Lily (Maxwells, 2017)

The Troubles saw conflict between Catholic republicans and protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland and reinforced political divisions. Bombings, street fights, roadblocks and riots marked this period of Irish history. Despite religious undertones, the primary drivers of the conflict were political and cultural, with religion serving as a marker of identity and division. Political symbols and slogans became tools of expression of identity, for example the Irish flag and murals.



Fig. 7: Bobby Sands mural on Falls Road, Belfast (Byrne, 2018)

During the Troubles, the Irish language became more than a linguistic tool—it transformed into a political weapon and a cultural symbol of resistance. It allowed Republicans to assert a distinctly non-British identity. In “Irish and Loyal: The Irish Language and Identity in Northern Ireland,” (2019) Wise offers a critical examination of how the Irish language has been used to construct and contest national identity in Northern Ireland. It highlights the ways in which language can serve as a symbol of resistance, a tool of exclusion, and potentially, a means of reconciliation. (Wise, 2019)

Since the Good Friday Agreement, political identity has been transformed. Brexit has revived discussions around Irish reunification and reshaped political discourse, especially in Northern Ireland. Ireland's identity is now closely tied to its role within the EU, contrasting with Northern Ireland's position post-Brexit.

Movements for LGBTQ+ rights, abortion rights, and environmental activism have also changed political identity, further reinstating the constructive nature of Irish identity.

Over 100 years since the Easter Rising, the Irish continue to commemorate and honor this pivotal moment in history. In the last decade, people are getting portraits of rebel leaders, sections from the proclamation of independence, and many other symbols of the rising tattooed to both remember our nation's past and feel connected to our history.

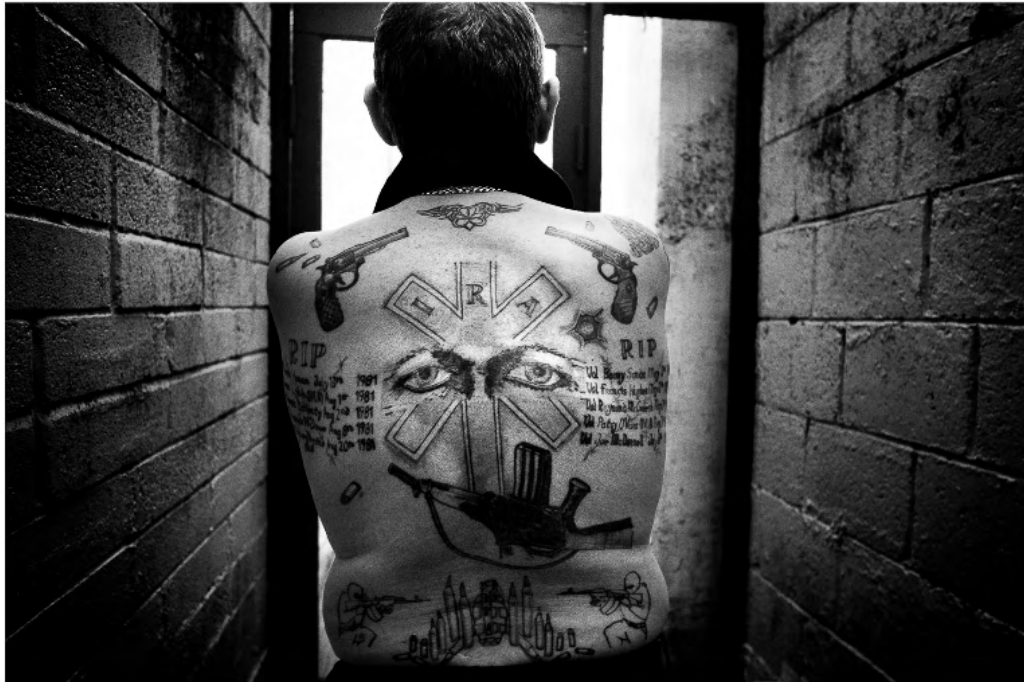


*Fig. 8: Still from Baring Arms (RTE Culture, 2020)*

A short documentary titled “Baring Arms” explores the symbols and motives for those who get tattoos commemorating the Easter Rising. This documentary really gives an insight into how important it is for Irish people to connect to their history. One of the interviewees claimed the tattoo of the GPO he was getting was just as important to him as having his children’s names tattooed. Another interviewee was getting a backpiece that included portraits of rebel leaders. The choice of design, having James Connolly in the middle with flames surrounding him, symbolised him as the spark that ignited a change in

public opinion. There was evidently a lot of artistic choices that were made to elevate this tattoo from being a typical commemorative piece to a more personal dedication to Connolly. (RTÉ Culture, 2020)

As well as commemorating the 1916 Rising, individuals may choose to commemorate the Troubles through their tattoos. I will analyse five tattoos that represent Irish political identity in different periods of time, and how the symbols in the tattoo design correlate with Stuart Hall's theory of constructive identity. I will provide an analysis for each tattoo that considers the style of tattooing, colours, and contrast to further examine how these tattoos relate to Irish identity.



*Fig. 9: IRA back tattoo (Messori, n.d.)*

This individual's tattoos are very bold and dark, which may align with the person's identity. The large tattoo of a face with intense eyes surrounded by a cross-like structure could be a symbol of a watchful presence or a significant figure in the individual's life. Perhaps the gun at the bottom acts as a mouth of the face, which indicates a strong connection with violence. The cross structure with "IRA" written in it may indicate a religious identity, reflecting how the individual situates themselves within a broader cultural or spiritual narrative. The multiple "RIP" tattoos suggest a connection to loss and remembrance, indicating that the individual has experienced significant losses that have shaped their identity.

These tattoos serve as a memorial, embedding the memory of lost individuals into their own identity. The tattoos of guns and other symbols of violence could reflect a personal history or environment marked by conflict or aggression.

Through these tattoos, the individual communicates their personal history, values, and Irish identity, aligning with Stuart Hall's theory, as symbols and signs are curated to represent this individual's identity. These tattoos act as visual narratives, weaving together the individual's past experiences, current beliefs, and personal connections, ultimately contributing to their sense of self.





*Fig. 10: James McClean's Free Derry tattoo (Crombie, 2024)*

This tattoo on Irish footballer James McClean is evidently a representation of his political identity. As a Derry man, he has the iconic “You are now entering Free Derry” mural with a tricolour and lyrics of “The Town I Loved So Well.” It is clear in this image that his other tattoos are in black and grey, the only colour being in the Irish flag. This confirms the importance of Irish identity. The bold lettering on the white building in the mural surrounded by light grey wash background helps the text be prominent in the design. McClean faced scrutiny for refusing to wear a poppy on Remembrance Day, as he thought it would be inappropriate as six people were killed by British soldiers in his housing estate during the troubles. It is evident that McClean has a strong connection with his Irish identity and chooses to portray it in his tattoos. (Austin, 2018)

The Free Derry mural in this tattoo acts as an index to the history of Derry city, which can be seen as a statement of solidarity with the Irish nationalist cause and a tribute to the individuals who have been part of this struggle. It embodies a sense of pride in Irish heritage and a commitment to the ideals of justice and equality. By choosing to permanently mark their body with this image, McClean is making a powerful declaration of their political beliefs and their connection to Irish identity.





*Fig. 11: 1916 Easter Rising commemorative tattoo (RTE Culture, 2020)*

In this tattoo, we see a depiction of the GPO during the 1916 rising. The design itself can be split into thirds: in the top is the title “Easter Rising 1916” in bold black script. The middle section features active fighting, with smoke using negative space to break up the design and help it fit and flow with the wearer’s back. The bottom section features depictions of rebels, framed by negative space smoke. This tattoo is in a traditional style, with bright bold colours and thick black lines, a style which will hold well over time. The colour palette itself is also representative of the Irish identity, as the most prominent colour here is green, whereas all other colours featured are muted or grey tones.

This tattoo represents Irish identity through Hall’s constructivist theory, which states that identities are not fixed but constructed through shared cultural narratives and symbols. The depiction of the 1916 Easter Rising, a pivotal event in Ireland’s fight for independence, constructs a collective Irish identity

rooted in resistance and resilience. The design uses visual and textual semiotics such as the ruined GPO and armed revolutionaries to evoke a shared historical memory. These symbols do not merely reflect history; they actively shape and reinforce a sense of Irish identity, linking the wearer to a larger, evolving narrative of struggle and nationalism.



*Fig. 12: 1916 Rising leaders commemoration tattoo (Fintan, 2019)*

Using Hall's constructivist identity theory, the tattoo transforms these individuals into cultural symbols, linking the wearer to Ireland's nationalist legacy. The black and grey realism evokes a sense of reverence, highlighting the martyrdom and sacrifice of these leaders. The inclusion of multiple figures emphasizes collective action in shaping Ireland's identity. This tattoo creates a personal yet shared narrative, connecting the wearer to a broader historical struggle for Irish sovereignty.

This tattoo consists of black and grey portraits of leaders of the 1916 rising, such as Padraig Pearse and James Connolly. The design uses strong contrast of light and dark in the popular tattoo style of realism. The portraits have smooth grey shading, which allows the artist to show their artistic skills while staying true to the portraits themselves. The expressions and likenesses are instantly recognisable as the rebel leaders. This tattoo acts as a strong commemoration of the 1916 rising.



*Fig. 13: Portrait tattoo of Bobby Sands (Kelly, 2016)*

This tattoo features a bright, bold portrait of Bobby Sands, a hunger striker who died during the Troubles. It also incorporates the quote from Sands: "Our revenge will be the laughter of our children," which is also featured in the mural in fig. 7. This provides evidence that words and phrases also constitute as symbols and indexes.

The use of bright primary colours creates a strong contrast in this tattoo, which is enhanced by the stark white highlights in the face and collar. The light blue background, white highlights, and Sands' expression in the portrait gives him an almost angelic appearance, acting as a beautiful commemorative piece of art. The placement of this tattoo also lends itself to being highly important to the wearer. The inner forearm is a spot that can be seen at any time by the wearer, and can easily be shown to others.

Sands' legacy as a hunger striker during the Troubles is central to modern Irish identity, particularly for those connected to nationalist and anti-colonial struggles. The quote conveys a message of resilience and optimism, shifting the focus from vengeance to the vision of a liberated, joyful future. Through Hall's constructivist lens, the tattoo transforms Sands into a cultural icon, embodying not just personal sacrifice but also collective aspirations. By placing this image permanently on their body, the wearer actively aligns with Sands' ideals, reinforcing a shared historical and cultural identity tied to Irish resistance and freedom.

The tattoos examined in this chapter underscore the profound connection between Irish identity and historical memory. Tattoos commemorating pivotal moments, such as the 1916 Easter Rising and the Troubles, serve as deeply personal yet collectively resonant expressions of Irish nationalism and cultural pride. By embedding historical symbols, narratives, and personal losses into their designs, individuals engage in an ongoing dialogue with the past, shaping and reshaping their sense of self and belonging.

These tattoos not only preserve memory but also assert identity, making bold statements about political beliefs, heritage, and resilience. The use of styles, colors, and symbolism reflects the evolving nature of Irish identity while honoring its roots. Through this body art, wearers visually and permanently inscribe their allegiance to Ireland's storied legacy, reinforcing how shared history continues to shape individual and collective identities in a dynamic and meaningful way.



## Chapter 3: *Tatú Reiligiúnach Éireannach (Irish Religious Tattoos)*

### Religious Identity

The role of religion in shaping Irish identity is certainly significant, as religious symbols have become symbols of Ireland. However, following controversies and scandals from the Catholic church, Irish religious identity has transformed. Conflict between Catholics and Protestants has also impacted Irish identity. Religious influence in Ireland has declined, as the number of people who stated they have no religion in the census has declined by 187% in the last decade. (CSO, 2023) This further demonstrates the complexities of religious identity in Ireland.



Fig. 14: Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979 (McDonald, 2016)

The Catholic church played an extremely dominant role in Ireland, particularly in terms of education, healthcare, and morality. Conservatism defined most aspects of Irish life following the creation of the Irish Free State. Censorship of films and a ban on divorce and contraceptives, along with conservative ideas of sexuality and family dynamics were expected. The church controlled the schools and voluntary hospitals (Ó Corráin, 2022). This had a significant impact on the population's religious and moral identity.

Sinead O' Connor's act of tearing up a picture of Pope John Paul II on Saturday Night Live (1992) was a symbolic critique of the Catholic church's power and its controversies in Ireland, particularly regarding child abuse scandals and social control. This act was a pivotal moment in Irish cultural history, representing a public challenge to the Church's authority. O' Connor's protest was both personal and political, aimed at exposing institutional abuses within the Church. The picture itself belonged to her mother, who was abusive to O' Connor as a child. Following her mother's death, O' Connor was sent to a Magdalen Asylum. It is evident that she tore up the picture of the Pope to make a global statement on the abuse and power of the church, as well as a form of self-liberation. She made a statement so ahead of her time, and was one of the first people to speak out about abuse in the church. (CBC News, 2023)



*Fig. 15: Sinead O'Connor tearing a picture of the Pope on live television, 1992 (CBC News, 2023)*



In contemporary Ireland, the church does not play as significant a role in society. However, I think religious identity may still be part of cultural identity, especially in Northern Ireland. The church and state has been separated to an extent, for example the introduction of non-religious schools and passing of the gay marriage and abortion referendums in recent years. While the church's control has declined dramatically, symbols of Catholicism are somewhat tied to Irish identity, for example the Celtic cross, which has become a popular tattoo design.

This chapter explores the intersection of Irish religious identity and tattooing, using specific examples to illustrate the ways in which individuals express their connection to Irish heritage and faith through body art. Hall's framework provides a lens through which to examine how symbols like the Celtic cross, the Trinity Knot, and depictions of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ are used in tattoo designs to articulate both personal and collective identities.

The examples analyzed in this chapter highlight a diversity of approaches to religious symbolism in tattoos. From intricately detailed designs like those inspired by the Book of Kells to the bold simplicity of a Trinity Knot, these tattoos connect the wearer to Ireland's storied past and spiritual traditions. Even within religious tattoos, variations in artistic execution such as the quality of linework, shading, and design placement further emphasize the importance of craftsmanship in honoring the values and stories these tattoos represent. Additionally, the chapter considers the complex relationship between religion and identity, particularly in the context of contemporary Ireland, where cultural Catholicism coexists with secularism and other spiritual practices.

By analyzing these tattoos, this chapter aims to shed light on how individuals navigate their connections to Irish history, spirituality, and cultural pride, using body art as a medium for self-expression and identity construction.



*Fig. 16: Celtic Cross tattoo, featuring designs inspired by the Book of Kells (Aranos, 2024)*

This impressive piece was made by Fausto Aranós, @twrch\_knot on Instagram, an artist who specializes in Irish and Celtic tattoo designs and is based in Dublin. This tattoo encompasses many aspects of Irish religious identity. The focal point of the design is the icon of the Celtic cross in the centre, which is adorned with trinity knots and Celtic knotwork. The cross itself features bold, clean linework and grey stipple shading, which separates itself from the black background it sits before. The piece is framed by Celtic knotwork, and designs inspired by the Book of Kells. The forearm placement

and strong use of contrast in this design is crucial to understanding the importance of Irish identity for the wearer of this tattoo.

The methods of how the different symbol and sign in this tattoo relate to each other can be supported by Hall's constructive identity theory. Each element of the tattoo could work perfectly as an individual tattoo; however the artist and client must have worked together to piece together a design that takes elements of the client's Irish identity. Each of the client's values and beliefs were constructed and framed into a design that the artist was able to execute in a very impressive way.



*Fig. 17: My tattoo of a Trinity Knot (Hunt, 2024)*

The Trinity Knot is a timeless symbol with rich cultural and spiritual significance. Originating from ancient Celtic traditions, it comprises three interconnected loops forming a triangular shape. The Celts associated it with the three stages of life: youth, adulthood, and old age, or the elements of earth, water, and sky. Many regard the three points in the symbol to represent the holy trinity: the father, son and holy spirit.

The Trinity Knot embodies concepts of eternity, continuity, and the interconnectedness of life. Its unbroken loops symbolize an unending cycle. The Trinity Knot serves as a connection between Celtic symbols and contemporary interpretations, reflecting an enduring search for meaning and connection. It is a hugely important symbol of Irish identity, and its design lends itself to being tattooed. (McGrath, 2023)

This is my tattoo of a trinity knot, which is an extremely popular tattoo design. While I don't identify with any religion, I see this ancient Celtic symbol as a representation of my proud identity as an Irish woman. I chose to place it on my upper left arm close to my heart, facing outwards as it connects me with

my Irish heritage. The linework is thick, bold and black. I requested this specifically as I know it will last over time. I chose to keep negative space in between the lines instead of shading, this is because I think the simple, yet complex interlocking lines are powerful alone without needing any more detail.



*Fig. 18: Poorly executed Virgin Mary tattoo (O' Connor, 2018)*

This tattoo was done by Larry O Connor, a tattoo artist in Wexford town. The tattoo features a design of the Virgin Mary, which is framed by light rays. The extremely prominent placement of this tattoo on the top of an individual's head can suggest the importance of the symbol of the Virgin Mary for them, thus portraying the significance of religious identity for this person. Although it's clear in this image that this person is heavily tattooed on his arms and hands, it is still a huge commitment to place a tattoo on the head.

Interestingly, this tattoo is not perfect. The outline of the design is shaky and uneven, and the shading in the fabric is stiff and not smooth, and the entire piece lacks any dimension. Arguably the most important part of a portrait, the face, is out of proportion, particularly when you look at the size of the mouth and the angle of the nose. While the client may have been satisfied with this tattoo, the Virgin Mary is often a depiction of perfection, which this tattoo is far from.





*Fig. 19: Virgin Mary tattoo (Fay, 2023)*

This tattoo is a stark contrast to the previous depiction of the Virgin Mary. While this design is much smaller it is still on an extremely prominent place in the body. In this tattoo, we see a full body portrait of the Virgin Mary with clean, crisp lines, lending itself to the perfection that Mary often represents. The use of negative space and lack of shading in this tattoo works in its favour as the focus is instantly drawn to the centre of the image from the thicker black design framing it. Regardless of a matter of taste, this tattoo is undoubtedly performed by a more skilled artist than the previous. Again, religious identity is portrayed in this tattoo. The left hand of this individual bears a tattoo that must carry extreme significance and importance to them.



*Fig. 20: Sinead O' Connor and Debbie Harry (Getty Images, 2011)*

Sinead O' Connor, despite her contempt with the Catholic church, wore a tattoo of Jesus Christ in the centre of her chest. However, during her life O' Connor identified with many different spiritual faiths. While she criticised the church's attitude and behaviour towards women and children, she explained in her memoir that there were aspects of the Catholic faith that she identified with to an extent (O'Connor, 2021). Regardless, the bright, bold and striking tattoo of Jesus on her chest is absolutely a representation of her many complex religious identities. This also correlates with Stuart Hall's theory of a constructed identity. While O' Connor disagreed with much of what the Catholic church stands for, she still found some aspects of Irish identity through religion.



Religious tattoos rooted in Irish identity serve as striking examples of how personal beliefs and cultural heritage intertwine to shape individual expressions. Through symbols like the Trinity Knot, Celtic crosses, and religious figures, wearers not only honor their faith and heritage but also engage with Ireland's rich history and evolving identity.

The examples discussed underscore the critical role of artistry in conveying meaning, as seen in the contrasting depictions of the Virgin Mary and other religious tattoos. While some designs achieve profound resonance through meticulous craftsmanship, others fall short of honoring the significance of their symbols, highlighting the importance of execution in such deeply personal expressions.

Looking at tattoos representing Irish Religious identity, it is evident that the hybridity of 21<sup>st</sup> century tattoo culture juxtaposes signs and symbols. Imagery associated with religion may not simply represent religion, instead represent the complex dynamic nature of cultural identity. For example, my Trinity knot tattoo is not connected to any religious beliefs or values, instead it serves as a connection to Ireland. Sinéad O' Connor's Jesus tattoo also juxtaposes religious symbols, as she has identified with many spiritual faiths.

Ultimately, these tattoos exemplify Hall's theory of constructive identity, showing how Irish identity is continuously shaped by cultural and historical narratives. By permanently marking their bodies with these symbols, individuals create lasting connections to their roots, demonstrating the enduring power of religious and cultural imagery in modern Ireland.

## Chapter 4: *Diaspóra na hÉireann (The Irish Diaspora)*

### Diaspora



Fig. 21: Exhibition in the Epic Museum ([isodesign.co.uk](http://isodesign.co.uk), 2024)

There have been many cases of Irish emigration, notably due to the Irish Famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economic crises in the 1950s and 1980s, and the current period where Ireland faces a housing and cost of living crisis. It is believed that ten million people have emigrated from Ireland since 1800. Irish identity has been preserved in many ways as people emigrate and integrate their Irish culture into the place they move to.

The Irish Famine (1845-1855) triggered a massive wave of emigration, with 1.8 million Irish people, many from impoverished Irish-speaking regions, fleeing to the United States. This migration created large Irish communities abroad, especially in the America. By the late 19th century, nearly half of Ireland's population lived abroad. (Glynn, 2012) It is evident that those who emigrated during the famine carried their Irish identity with them. In 2023, an estimated 31 million Americans reported to have Irish ancestry. (Washburn,

2023) With the largest St Patrick's Day parade being in New York, it is clear that Irish identity has been passed through generations of Americans who take pride in their heritage.

In the 1960s, economic development reduced emigration, and by the 1970s, more people returned to Ireland than left. However, economic difficulties in the 1980s, caused by excessive borrowing, the oil crisis, and rising unemployment, led to a surge in emigration. By the late 1980s, Ireland was experiencing widespread emigration again, with men leaving at higher rates than women. Emigration was particularly high from urban areas, reflecting the tough economic conditions. (Glynn, 2012)

We are currently in a period of emigration from Ireland. Rent and house prices have skyrocketed, and the cost of living crisis is affecting the population of Ireland. A huge amount of people are choosing to move to Australia, the UK and America as they feel with the political and economic climate in Ireland that they have no other choice. They carry their Irish identity with them, through music, language and cultural practices. Tattoos are another way of displaying Irish identity. Designs featuring Celtic knotwork or historical memorials are a permanent reminder of Irish heritage and cultural identity.



Fig. 22: Samuel O' Reilly tattoo advertisement (New York Herald, 1897)

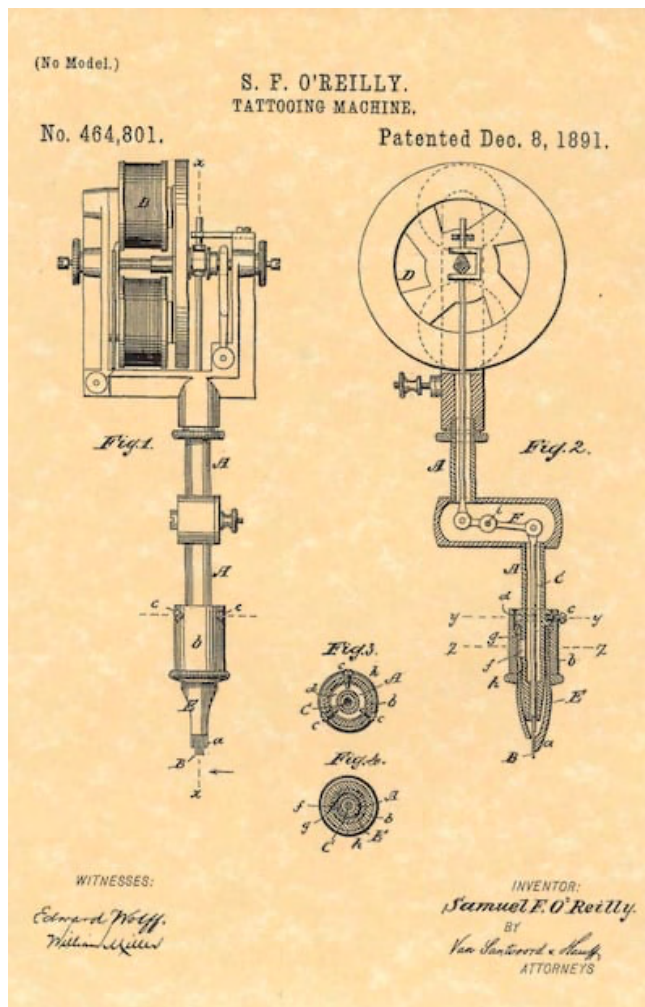


Fig. 23: Illustration of O' Reilly's tattoo machine, 1891 (Glynn-Farrell, 2018)

Perhaps the most influential case of Irish diaspora on tattoo culture was Samuel O' Reilly. O' Reilly was born in Connecticut to Irish parents in 1854. He learned the art of tattooing during a brief stint in the navy, and opened a tattoo studio in New York where he exhibited his "painted people." O' Reilly developed one of Thomas Edison's failed experiments, thus inventing the electric tattoo machine, which revolutionized the tattoo industry. (Glynn-Farrell, 2018)

Tattoos have emerged as a powerful medium through which individuals navigate and articulate identity, particularly within diasporic communities. For the Irish diaspora, tattooing offers a unique way to preserve, celebrate, and adapt cultural heritage while bridging the geographical divide from Ireland.

These tattoos with rich symbolism serve as both personal declarations and collective affirmations of Irishness.

From ancient Ogham script to globally recognized icons like Guinness, the tattoos explored in this chapter illustrate the dynamic relationship between historical roots and contemporary expressions of Irish identity. Each design carries layers of meaning, linking family, community, and homeland, highlighting the dual role of tattoos as both anchors to the past and markers of evolving cultural narratives in an increasingly globalised world.



*Fig. 24: Guinness toucan tattoo (K, 2024)*

This tattoo features a vibrant toucan carrying three pints of Guinness, an iconic symbol of Irish culture. While the toucan originated as part of Guinness advertising in the mid-20th century, it has transcended its commercial origins to become a playful and recognizable symbol of Irish identity. (Brodsky, 2018) For members of the Irish diaspora, such imagery connects them to shared cultural symbols tied to Irish traditions and social life. The Toucan functions as a bridge between Ireland's cultural exports, like Guinness, and the wearer's personal expression of Irishness. The combination of humor and nostalgia in the design conveys a lighthearted yet profound connection to Irish heritage. The bold colors and dynamic pose modernize the symbol, showing how Irish identity can evolve while maintaining its historical and cultural essence.

For the diaspora, tattoos like this celebrate Irish culture in a way that is both accessible and deeply personal. Guinness, as a global brand synonymous with Ireland, allows the tattoo to resonate universally with those connected to Irish heritage. The whimsical imagery of the toucan carrying pints suggests themes of celebration, community, and resilience, key elements of Irish identity both

at home and abroad. By incorporating a commercial yet deeply symbolic element into the tattoo, the wearer constructs their identity through cultural symbols that are widely recognized and cherished. The design reflects how Irish identity is shaped not only by traditional emblems but also by modern, globally shared representations, ensuring that cultural heritage remains vibrant and adaptable across generations and locations.





*Fig. 24: Harp tattoo (Brown, 2024)*

This tattoo features a harp, Ireland's national emblem, with the word "Éire" displayed on a banner. For the Irish diaspora, this design represents a strong and enduring connection to their homeland, invoking cultural pride and identity. The harp, deeply rooted in Irish heritage, embodies themes of resilience, unity, and national identity. The bold colors green, white, and gold, are evocative of the Irish tricolor flag, further emphasizing the wearer's connection to Ireland and its struggles for independence. The banner bearing "Éire" underscores linguistic heritage, symbolizing a commitment to preserving Irish language and culture.

For individuals living outside Ireland, such tattoos serve as a personal declaration of cultural roots and a way to maintain a sense of belonging. The



harp, as an emblem of Irish sovereignty and pride, resonates across generations and geographic divides. By choosing a traditional yet stylised design, the wearer bridges the historical with the contemporary, reflecting both reverence for the past and adaptability in expressing Irish identity in a modern context. This tattoo embodies the process of constructing identity through cultural symbols, as described by Hall. The wearer actively reaffirms their Irishness, connecting themselves to the broader narrative of Ireland's history, culture, and independence. As a piece of body art, it serves both as a personal keepsake of heritage and as a public marker of identity, ensuring that the cultural significance of Irish symbols endures and evolves within the global diaspora.



*Fig. 26: Saor, written in Ogham (Ogham.co, n.d.)*

The tattoo on the individual's upper back, featuring Ogham script circled by a dotted pattern, is a symbol of Irish identity and cultural heritage, especially within the context of the Irish diaspora. Ogham is an ancient Irish alphabet, primarily used for inscriptions on stone monuments. This choice of tattoo reflects a deep connection to Irish history and linguistic heritage, acting as a visual representation of the individual's roots. Ogham script is a uniquely Irish form of writing, less likely to be co-opted or commercialized compared to more widely recognized symbols like the shamrock or Celtic cross. This makes it a powerful and personal symbol for those wishing to assert their Irish identity authentically and intimately. The tattoo serves as a form of cultural preservation, allowing the individual to maintain a connection to their heritage despite being geographically distant from Ireland.

The circular pattern of dots surrounding the Ogham script may symbolize unity, continuity, and the cyclical nature of life. This can be interpreted as reflecting the enduring nature of Irish identity, which persists and evolves through generations, despite the challenges of displacement and assimilation. For the Irish diaspora, this tattoo can act as a reminder of their collective history, shared struggles, and the enduring sense of belonging to the broader Irish community.



*Fig. 27: My Claddagh tattoo (Hunt, 2024)*

A symbol of love, loyalty, and friendship, the Claddagh ring has endured across generations, inspiring people from all walks of life with its timeless meaning. Originating in the 17th century in the small fishing village of Claddagh, this distinctive design features a heart held by two hands, topped with a crown, a design representing the hope that love and friendship will always prevail. The ring gained widespread popularity in the mid-19th century, particularly among Irish immigrants during the Great Famine of 1847-49. (Bannon Jewellers, 2022)

This is my tattoo of a Claddagh on the back of my neck. I chose this design as I have a strong connection with Claddagh rings, as myself and my grandmother wear matching Claddagh rings. The Claddagh not only connects me with my family, but also with Ireland. Wherever I travel in the world I have a symbol of Ireland permanently on my skin.



*Fig. 28: Poolbeg Chimneys tattoo (Byrne, 2024)*

This tattoo depicts the Poolbeg Chimneys and the Poolbeg Lighthouse, iconic landmarks of Dublin, framed with floral motifs and nautical rope. For members of the Irish diaspora, such imagery serves as a profound connection to their homeland, symbolising nostalgia, belonging, and cultural pride. The Poolbeg Chimneys evoke collective memories tied to the city and its people. Similarly, the lighthouse, a symbol of guidance, may resonate with diaspora members seeking to maintain ties to Ireland while navigating life abroad. The bright colors and stylised design modernise the traditional symbol, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of Irish identity within the global diaspora. The framing elements add layers of meaning, with the rope potentially symbolising the connection between Ireland and its people dispersed across the globe.

For the Irish diaspora, tattoos like this one function as anchors to identity, embodying both personal and shared cultural significance. They are not only aesthetic but become part of the wearer's narrative, a constructed identity rooted in heritage. By choosing imagery so closely tied to Dublin, the wearer

asserts a connection to a specific place within Ireland, suggesting a personal or familial link. This tattoo illustrates how identity is an ongoing process, constructed through the reinterpretation of cultural symbols. For the wearer, it serves as a personal and public declaration of belonging, preserving Irishness in a way that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and adapted for contemporary expression. In doing so, it bridges the geographical and emotional distance between Ireland and its global community.



In examining the tattoos of the Irish diaspora, it becomes evident that these symbols encapsulate more than aesthetic value; they are deeply embedded in the processes of cultural construction and preservation. By inscribing their skin with emblems of Ireland, such as the Claddagh, Ogham, or Poolbeg landmarks, individuals actively engage in correlation with their heritage, blending traditional and modern elements to reflect their personal narratives. These tattoos are not static markers but living representations of Irishness, shaped by history, memory, and the realities of diasporic life. Through this fusion of the old and the new, the Irish diaspora ensures that their identity remains vibrant, adaptable, and enduring across generations.

## Conclusion

Tattooing, as explored throughout this thesis, serves as a powerful medium through which individuals construct, negotiate, and express Irish identity. Drawing on semiotic theory and Hall's theory of constructive identity, it is evident that these tattoos are not merely aesthetic choices but deeply embedded markers of personal and cultural narratives. Across the chapters, we have examined how body art is used to navigate Irish history, spirituality, and diasporic belonging, revealing the dynamic connection between past and present, tradition and adaptation.

In the discussion of Irish identity, it became clear that the markers of national and cultural belonging are fluid and continuously reshaped. Whether through the adoption of traditional Celtic imagery, religious iconography, or contemporary symbols of Irishness, tattooing reflects an ongoing engagement with heritage. Tattoos such as the Celtic cross, Ogham script, and Claddagh ring illustrate how historical symbols persist as modern expressions of identity, allowing individuals to feel connected to their ancestry while reinterpreting these motifs for contemporary relevance. The presence of these symbols on skin as a permanent and deeply personal canvas, highlights the enduring power of cultural affiliation.

Religious tattooing in Ireland highlights the evolving relationship between faith and identity in the modern world. Tattoos of the Virgin Mary, the Celtic cross, and the Trinity Knot exemplify how spirituality is deeply intertwined with national identity, yet subject to personal reinterpretation. The contrast between a well-executed religious tattoo and one that lacks technical skill revealed how craftsmanship plays a crucial role in honouring the significance of these designs. Furthermore, figures like Sinéad O'Connor exemplify the complexities of Irish religious identity, showing that even those who critique institutional religion may still engage with its symbols as part of their broader cultural expression. The duality of both rejecting and embracing elements of



Catholicism mirrors Ireland's own shift from a traditionally religious society to one grappling with secularism, spirituality, and cultural Catholicism.

The exploration of the Irish diaspora demonstrates the ways in which tattoos serve as anchors to heritage for those living outside of Ireland. From Guinness toucans to Poolbeg Chimneys, these designs are deeply personal yet universally resonant, providing wearers with a tangible link to their homeland. Diasporic tattoos bridge generational gaps, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of Irishness despite geographical distance. This process aligns with Hall's theory, illustrating how identity is not inherited in a fixed state but actively constructed through cultural engagement and reinterpretation. The use of Ogham script stood out as a form of resistance against cultural erasure, reclaiming linguistic heritage in an intimate and permanent form. The fact that many diaspora tattoos incorporate both traditional and modern elements further reinforces the adaptability of Irish identity.

One of the most striking themes that emerged from this thesis is the role of artistry and technical execution in shaping the impact of tattoos as cultural markers. The comparison between skilful and poorly executed tattoos demonstrated how craftsmanship influences the effectiveness of these symbols. A well-designed Celtic cross or Virgin Mary tattoo not only conveys religious devotion but also honours the intricacies of the tradition it represents. Conversely, tattoos that lack artistic quality can undermine the intended meaning, highlighting the importance of precision and respect when engaging with cultural imagery. This emphasis on quality also ties into the broader conversation about tattooing as an art form, with artists playing a crucial role in mediating identity construction for their clients.

Ultimately, this thesis has demonstrated that Irish identity, as expressed through tattooing, is neither static nor singular. It is a living, evolving construct shaped by personal experiences, historical contexts, and global influences. Whether inked on the bodies of those in Ireland or those of the diaspora, these tattoos serve as deeply meaningful expressions of belonging, resilience, and

pride. They function as visible declarations of identity, allowing wearers to engage with their heritage in a way that is both personal and public.

In conclusion, tattooing is more than decoration - it is a form of storytelling, a way to navigate identity, and a means of connecting with one's past, present, and future. The permanence of tattoos mirrors the lasting influence of Irish heritage, ensuring that no matter where an individual may be, their identity remains etched in both their skin and their history. Through the ink they wear, individuals engage in an ongoing conversation with Ireland, its culture, and its ever-changing sense of self.

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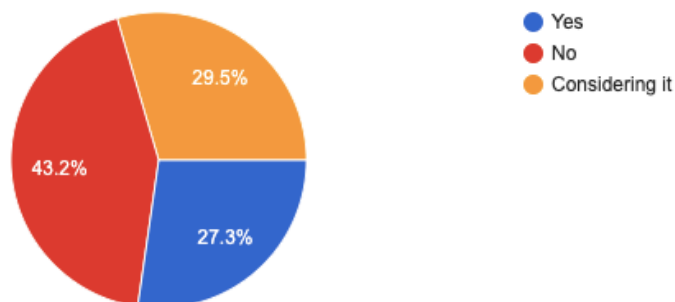
## Appendix

In researching this thesis, I conducted a survey that was shared on social media. The survey results shed light on how tattoos are viewed in relation to Irish cultural identity and their evolving social acceptance. A notable 58% of respondents are aged between 18-25, suggesting that tattoos are particularly popular among younger individuals. When considering the respondents' geographic backgrounds, 59% grew up in towns or cities, while 36% came from rural areas. This distribution indicates that urban areas may have more visibility of tattoo culture, with access to diverse influences that shape tattoo styles, including Irish heritage.

Regarding the role of tattoos in Irish cultural identity, responses were mixed. While 46% expressed neutrality, 25% agreed and 17% strongly agreed that tattoos are an important part of Irish culture. However, only 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed, highlighting that tattoos, despite varying perceptions, hold significance in conversations about Irish heritage. When asked about the importance of reflecting cultural heritage through tattoos, 32% felt it was "not important," while 16% considered it "very important." This suggests that tattoos for many individuals are more about personal expression than a direct reflection of cultural identity.

Have you ever chosen a tattoo design based on Irish historical or nationalist symbols (e.g., Celtic knots, Easter Rising references)?

88 responses



Interestingly, 27% of participants had chosen a tattoo design based on Irish historical or nationalist symbols, such as Celtic knots or references to the Easter Rising. In contrast, 43% had not, and 29% were considering such designs. The majority (55%) of respondents viewed tattoos neutrally in Ireland today, with 37% perceiving them positively. Nearly all respondents (97%) agreed that tattoos have become more socially acceptable in Ireland over the past decade, signifying a shift in cultural norms. These findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of tattooing in Ireland, blending personal, aesthetic, and cultural significance.

**Do you believe tattoos are an important part of Irish cultural identity?**

98 responses

