Women in tattoo culture

A study of aesthetic-affective practices in contemporary tattoo studios

Daniele M. Lugli

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Abstract

This study investigates the current state of tattoo culture in order to understand what might configure a feminist tattoo practice focused on inclusion and equality. Looking at the process of aestheticisation, which coincides with the increased participation of women in tattooing, I argue that certain women-led practices incite cultural change in ways that are both aesthetic and affective. By means of a case study, I gather insights into the atmospheric experience in a tattoo studio, arriving at a framework that aims to inform studies and practices seeking to include people who would not feel entitled to participate in tattooing otherwise. I conclude by arguing that a feminist practice in tattooing is necessarily an aesthetic-affective practice that can, through ethical engagement, minimise the contradictions in the process of aestheticisation.

Keywords: aestheticisation; design ethnography; feminist practice; tattooing

Declaration

I certify that this exegesis is an original work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and, that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this exegesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the exegesis.

Daniele M. Lugli
April 27, 2022

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Preface

My decision to become a tattoo artist was rather swift. I was a lecturer and designer, working mostly in fashion and illustration. Tattoos were never part of my life — I had no tattoos myself and only recently had people around me starting to get theirs. Aside from what I saw on TV shows, I did not know much about the practice. But at that point, in 2017, the cultural shift in tattooing already had momentum. Many art school graduates turned to tattooing and rose as social media stars. I was watching them, while working in that space as well — I used Instagram as a portfolio for my illustrations. It was there that some of my followers and friends started saying that the images I published would look great as tattoo designs. Those comments stayed in the back of my mind for a while, but it was only when I accompanied a friend to get his first tattoo in a contemporary studio that I felt tattooing was actually something I could do. Unlike the tough-looking people on TV shows, people there looked like me. They did the type of work that I found aesthetically pleasing, in a carefully decorated studio that felt like all the other places my friends and I used to visit.

The next day, after some internet research, I found a place where I could pay for "tattooing lessons" to start on the craft. This is not the usual way to get started. Traditionally, aspiring tattoo artists have to find an established practitioner willing to take them on as apprentices. However, I did not know any tattoo artists and definitely did not feel confident enough to approach a stranger about my newfound interest. Having no cultural or social capital in the matter, I resorted to my economic capital — I paid for the classes, bought the recommended equipment and did 60 hours of practising on artificial skin before very nervously imprinting a small tattoo on a good friend's arm. While unconventional, this start worked out well for me: my "teacher" offered me a position in his studio. Since I already worked as an illustrator, there was visibly some creative potential in my work. But he saw something else: knowing that small and delicate tattoos were getting increasingly popular, especially with female clients, he wanted someone who would attract that kind of audience. After all, despite his fine skills, he had a rather intimidating, tough and rough presentation. While some women rightfully complain about being the token female tattoo artist in a studio, the situation did fit my purposes at that point.

I worked at three different studios before arriving at the one where I am today. They were all traditional parlours and, aside from an apprentice in one of them, I was the only woman holding a machine. Throughout this time, I heard men disdain the type of work I was doing and was "prohibited" from doing certain pieces that they considered bad, even though both my clients and I were interested in exploring that style. I also met men who were more supportive of my pursuit, but they often indicated that I needed to change something about myself — not only the style of work I did, but also the way that I presented and behaved — to be taken seriously as a tattoo artist. For that reason, I had the constant feeling that I did not belong in those spaces — I looked and acted differently from everyone else, I had different interests and appreciated different things. While these feelings of inadequacy were personally overwhelming, I now understand that such impressions affected me professionally as well. I did not see tattooing as a real career option for me. Those studios did not reflect the visual qualities of the work that I performed and they did not afford the aesthetic experience that I wanted my clients to have. Thinking about this dissonance only further undermined my self-confidence as a practitioner.

I was fortunate to be scouted — once again, on Instagram — by the owner of my current studio. It felt intimidating to be in a well-known studio, surrounded by very talented and experienced artists, but it was an unmissable opportunity. Despite this anxiety, I felt immediately welcomed, not only by my friendly co-workers but also by the feeling that I finally fitted in. This was a space that reflected my taste and artistic aspirations. I was part of a team of several female artists instead of being the odd one out. Through the studio's social media, I advertised exactly the type of work that I wanted to do and attracted the type of clients that resonated with my aesthetic sensibility.

Shortly after I started at this studio, I had a remarkable conversation with a client. She was a woman in her 40s who described herself as very "girly" and got a small tattoo of pink cherry blossoms on her hip. During the procedure, she told me that she had been wanting to get this tattoo for a long time and had actually been to a tattoo parlour 15 years earlier, but had given up and left at the last minute because she had felt bad, like she "should not be there" and that it was "not for her". However, when she found this studio and the type of work being done there, she felt confident to try again. She said she was comfortable in that space and when she looked at me, she saw someone who could be "one of her girlfriends", who could understand what she was looking for. Such an explicit account of her story and feelings summarised some questions I was trying to address and made me realise my experience as a practitioner was not that distant from those of my clients — and of many other women who decide to become tattoo artists. I am aware of how my trajectory was, in many ways, not as challenging as it can be for women who also face racial and class-based prejudice. But we seem to share the backlash from taking over a space that we are told we should not occupy — at least, not on our own terms.

Doing this research has changed the way I work and reshaped my relationship with tattoo culture. It has made me more knowledgeable about the field that I was freshly into and more aware of how it is shaped by complex social structures. It has made me more critical towards my own practice, while making me more forgiving about my trajectory. It has made me more attuned to my surroundings and more connected to other people, realising the impact that we all have on each other's stories. In this exegesis, I share this learning process hoping that tattooing can be for other women, like it became for me, a space of pleasure and possibility.

Introduction

Tattooing has historically been a stigmatised and male-dominated practice in the West. More than just carrying a mark on the skin, being a tattooed person represented a specific aesthetic and lifestyle traditionally associated with deviancy and rebellion. However, tattoos have become increasingly popular in the past decades to the point of being elevated to the status of art (Kosut 2014). The industry generated an estimated US$1.6 billion in revenue in 2017 and is expected to grow 7.7% a year over the next decade (McGinty 2018). Polls in the USA and Australia report that over two-thirds of participants consider tattoos a form of art and do not hold moral judgements about the difference between tattooed and non-tattooed people (Harris Poll 2012; YouGov 2015, 2017). More importantly, the demographics of tattoo enthusiasts is broader than ever: in the USA, an estimated 47% of millenials and 36% of generation X individuals have at least one tattoo — an almost threefold increase among 18–24-year-olds and double among the 30–49-year age group compared to the previous decade (Harris Poll 2015). Such a trend has also been detected in several countries in Europe and South America (Holmes 2018). Moreover, tattooed women have been shown to outnumber tattooed men in several polls worldwide (Sinha-Roy 2012; Fell 2018; Holmes 2018).

This means tattooing in Western countries such as Australia, the focus of this study, can no longer be understood as a single subculture, but must be seen as a sociocultural phenomenon that is part of mainstream culture and contains niche practices within it. These practices are informed by the multiplicity of participants' social identities — such as race, class and gender — which shape their tastes and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). As a consequence, such practices can configure very distinct aesthetic experiences, not only regarding the tattoo designs, but also the studio environment, the social interactions and people's relationships with their own bodies. Nevertheless, literature on the topic (DeMello 2000; Halnon and Cohen 2006; Sanders and Vail 2008) tends to establish dichotomies between subculture and mainstream, working class and middle class, tradition and commodification, insiders and outsiders — which risks ignoring nuances on both sides and within the spectrum.

This rather reductionist approach does not fully account for how women and other marginalised groups came to be a relevant demographic in tattooing. Like many other cultural practices, tattooing has been co-opted by neoliberalism and that needs to be problematised. However, an analysis that does not take gender dynamics into consideration risks placing the onus for this process on women as their participation in the field grows. More importantly, neoliberal theories are not concerned with how women can move forward to occupy a space that was (and arguably still is) traditionally dominated by white masculinity. Like other forms of body project, tattooing is a controversial practice, but it can be a source of pleasure and possibility as individuals engage ***with*** their bodies and, ***through*** their bodies, with the world around them. Considering this potential, it is crucial that women have not only the opportunity to participate in tattoo culture if they wish to do so, but also agency over how they do it. As such, this research is focused on the participation of women in tattooing, both as artists and as clients, not only as a result of the cultural change but also as a driving force behind it.

Most studies about women and tattoos are concerned with the tattooed individual, focusing on history (Osterud 2009; Mifflin 2013), how the body is perceived socially (Thompson 2015; Dann 2021) and the meaning and motivations behind the tattoos (Davidson 2016) — topics that have also been extensively covered in general tattoo literature (Lane 2014). This research takes advantage of my position as a tattoo artist and contributes to understanding of a less explored area: the ***practice*** of tattooing — understood here as a design practice that involves not only the creative work of conceptualising and executing drawings on skin, but also the actions that take place in the encounters between artists and clients. Theorising practice requires the aforementioned historical, social and cultural foundation. It also demands theories that support a critical analysis. In return, practice offers a unique viewpoint on the paths to action towards change in the ways tattoos are produced and consumed.

Therefore, approaching practice as research, this study seeks to understand the current state of tattoo culture in order to explore ***what a feminist tattoo practice might look — and feel — like***. Sara Ahmed (2017, 1) states that:

> *Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world); how to create relationships with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls.*

Following Ahmed, I define a feminist tattoo practice as one: that seeks to create more equal relationships among artists and between artists and clients; that is concerned with inviting, embracing and supporting individuals who were traditionally excluded from this space; and that defies the histories and traditions that perpetuate discrimination and inequalities. As a result of this exploration, I do not intend to arrive at "norms of conduct" or answers to ethical questions, but at a framework through which we can reflect on these ethical questions in terms of possibility — not only what is possible to achieve, but also the many possible ways to arrive at these diverse outcomes.

In this research I investigate: what positions women occupy within the field of tattooing; what types of women-led practices are already in place within tattoo culture; how those differ from the traditional male-dominated practices; and how they are experienced by artists and clients. In order to address these questions, I examine the social interactions that take place in the process of becoming and being tattooed, and how those are mediated by materiality and spatiality. These are made evident in the tattoo studio, a designed space where individuals engage sensorially and emotionally with their surroundings, with each other and with tattoo culture more broadly. By analysing the ways people engage affectively and aesthetically with tattoo culture within the studio space and how these actions relate to gendered power dynamics, this study is therefore concerned with affective and aesthetic practices, how they emerge, the settings through which they are configured and the relationalities that inhere within them. The next section describes the approaches and methods adopted to investigate the tattoo studio and, through this space, the development and implications of tattoo practices.

Methodology

This is qualitative, interpretative research situated in the field of design that draws upon theory and methods from sociology, cultural studies and critical feminist thought in order to address tattooing as a design practice that responds to a sociocultural phenomenon. It takes primarily a design ethnographic approach in order to investigate the nuances of the interpersonal and spatial engagements that happen within this context. Given the emergent and rapidly changing nature of contemporary tattoo culture, this research relies both on ethnographic fieldwork and on secondary interviews and social media content as evidence of the phenomenon being discussed. This digital data collection acquired additional importance due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered fieldwork during a considerable part of 2020 and 2021. This is not, however, a demerit because social media is a relevant space for the development of tattoo culture, as will be discussed throughout the exegesis.

The methodology is also permeated by a critical feminist position on research that takes as key epistemological principles: attending to the significance of gender in social life and research; positioning consciousness-raising as an orientation and methodological tool; challenging assumptions that the subject can be removed from research and that personal experiences are unscientific; committing to ethical engagement with research participants; and seeking to empower women and transform patriarchal social structures through research (Cook and Fonow 1983).

In addition, I recognise that, even as an insider and practitioner, I cannot fully grasp the multiplicity of experiences of other participants in this cultural group and I do not claim to speak for them. What I do is adopt an orientation "which recognizes the multiplicity of oppressions and supports struggles not directly indicated by one's own lived experience" (Smith 1995, 694). I am guided by an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) that understands identity as a social location from which the world is experienced rather than a pre-given category and that sees such location is determined by the complex enmeshment of race, gender, class, sexuality and other factors. The embodiment of social identity is especially relevant here considering the physical nature of tattoos and I add age and body shape as factors of influence in my analysis. My position as a middle-class white woman, originally from the Global South but now living and working in the Global North, is privileged in many ways and I try to respectfully surface experiences beyond my own in my interviews and examples. Since I bring these issues to my analysis of gender relations with limitations, I maintain the need for further studies that focus on the specificity of the experiences of people who are further marginalised.

The following subsections describe the combined methods that account for these principles and the aforementioned circumstances — an online survey of tattoo studios in the Melbourne area and a case study of one of those studios — as well as the theoretical orientation for research as practice. This approach has allowed me to have an overview of the cultural influences of multiple tattoo shops while focusing on the details and nuances of the experiences that take place in a studio with a strong female presence. Moreover, having practice at the centre of the research grants a discussion of gender in tattooing in terms of action and possibilities.

Research methods — survey of tattoo studios

In order to clarify what are the coexisting cultural influences in tattooing today and how those are manifested in the studio space, I mapped and analysed tattoo studios in Melbourne based on images and videos of their shopfronts and interiors available on social media. The work was performed from March to July 2020; therefore the social media content is restricted to this timeframe. The investigation is bound within the greater Melbourne area and might be limited by cultural specificities regarding its demographics and the acceptability of tattoos. The city was chosen as the site of research primarily due to the possibility of visiting selected studios in person for the next steps. However, Melbourne is in itself a relevant place to develop this research since the city is known for its "hipster" culture, often connected to gentrification and the emergence of businesses like specialty coffee and tattoo shops (Threadgold 2017) and is therefore representative of the trends in contemporary Western tattooing.

I started by searching for "tattoo studio Melbourne" on Google Maps in order to track their physical locations. The search returned 131 results, 26 of those being excluded as they were duplicates or not tattoo studios but other websites, supply stores, piercing shops, laser tattoo-removal clinics and cosmetic tattooing services. The remaining 105 were filtered according to the following criteria: (1) the studio was currently active on social media, either Facebook or Instagram; and (2) its social media contained images of the studio space. Ten studios were seemingly no longer operating or not active on social media platforms. All the other 95 studios had their social media inspected for basic information on location, tattoo artist demographics and prevailing tattoo styles. A total of 73 of these studios had pictures of their shopfronts and interiors available on social media and therefore were included in the analysis.

Each studio social media page was inspected for relevant images, videos and information that could provide insights. In the case of conflicting information between their website and social media, I considered the information available on social media to be the most up to date. The professional social media accounts of all tattoo artists listed were also examined on some occasions in order to gather more insights on the studio. Data collection and analysis happened simultaneously and, as expected, the first analysed studios had to be revisited as more insights emerged during the process. The images were first organised in separate folders for each studio. Studio data, research notes and analytic memos were included in a single, flexible spreadsheet that allowed emergence of themes and insights, following common practices of coding, categorisation and analysis in qualitative analytic research (Saldaña 2014). The spreadsheet containing the details of data collection and analysis can be found in Appendix 1, while the outcomes and discussion are found in Chapter 1.

Although limited to images and videos, this analysis still relied on sensory inputs rather than symbolic evaluation. The atmospheric framework permeating this study rejects the strict separation of the senses and embraces the idea that visual stimuli can invoke synesthetic responses, as images can be interpreted for their impression rather than just their expression (Biehl-Missal 2013). As such, two main categories of codes emerged when analysing the images: descriptive and perceptual keywords. Descriptive keywords highlight elements that are objectively found in the pictures, such as "wooden floor" or "flash on the wall". Perceptual keywords depict more subjective aspects, feelings or moods, like "warm" or "aggressive". These two categories were helpful in identifying patterns and subsequent interrelationships: what was congruent and what was contrasting, whether different material inputs might evoke similar feelings

or if the same material inputs might be perceived in different ways depending on other contextual factors.

I also developed a mood board for each one of these categories in order to illustrate and support the discussion in Chapter 1. Mood boards are assemblages of visually stimulating materials that communicate a story or concept, even though they are open to subjective interpretation. They are used throughout the design process in several disciplines, assisting in framing a design problem, communicating a vision, researching apparently contradicting ideas, connecting concrete and abstract concepts, and setting a path for future projects (Lucero 2012). Mood boards were a particularly useful tool for this typology because they helped capture the atmospheric inputs and did not rely solely on the photographic examples, which would have been limiting since no studio is fully representative of its category. For these boards, I included elements related to recurring keywords in the analysis — colours, textures, typography, decor objects and tattoo design styles, among others. From a processual point of view, making these mood boards contributed to generating more insights, refining and deepening the analysis, and clarifying the distinctions between studios. Moreover, the process helped me reflect on my own experiences, biases and preconceptions.

The virtual nature of the investigation was due to the circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as argued by Ardévol (2012), blending online and offline methods opens many possibilities in ethnographic research, as the internet provides access to records that would not be readily available otherwise and technology mediates specific cultural practices that add complexity to the analysis. I took advantage of technology here to "enter" dozens of spaces distributed along 10,000km², a task that would not be physically viable. Moreover, clients usually research online before choosing their artists and studios, so the process was not disconnected from the phenomenon being studied.

Another possibility afforded by image research on social media is based on the user-generated character of this content. As stated by Gillian Rose (2014, 15), these images "work to record things, to represent things, to argue and to create affect … they achieve this through what they show, how they are seen, and what is done with them". The images and videos analysed were already curated — they show what the people who produced them, people who were actively experiencing these spaces, chose to capture and share, which highlights particular aesthetic and affective components that they considered important. The images could also capture the picture-taker's performance in that space, their interaction with the environment and other people, and the story they told as they chose to make a statement about themselves through that experience.

Even though this investigation culminates in a typology, my goal is to provide a theoretical understanding to support the next steps of research, rather than to arrive at a definitive categorisation or generalisation. I recognise my position as a tattoo practitioner in one of the analysed studios and acknowledge that my analysis is informed not only by the theory developed by academics before me and the social context described in the following chapters, but also by my personal experience.

Research methods — case study

The empirical component of this research is presented as a case study of a contemporary tattoo studio. Qualitative case studies focus on particular instances of a phenomenon and are concerned with "the specific mechanisms and pathways between causes and effects" (Blatter 2008, 69). While these types of studies are not comprehensive and, therefore, do not aim for generalisation, they do afford a depth of analysis, "where depth can be understood as empirical completeness and natural wholeness or as conceptual richness and theoretical consistency" (ibid.). This makes it a productive approach to this research, given the purpose of this investigation is to understand the nuances of the aesthetic and affective engagements that happen inside the tattoo studio.

The nature of the investigation also favours an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic research is performed through direct and sustained contact with people in order to produce a rich account of individuals' experience while still acknowledging its irreducibility and being aware of the ethnographer's own role (O'Reilly 2012). Ethnography is a methodology rather than a method — meaning that it is an established way of inquiry within a specific research tradition, instead of a technique or tool to gather data. In fact, ethnographers might rely on a diverse range of tools, such as participant observation, interviews and fieldnotes, to collect and analyse research data. In addition, the research design in ethnography often evolves throughout the study, since it is directly influenced by the contact with people

The qualitative nature of ethnography makes this approach open to interpretation and different ways of knowing and doing, depending on the topic and circumstances at hand. Sarah Pink (2015), for instance, sees the concept of sensory ethnography as an alternative enhanced by the use of different senses to grasp knowledge that is not spoken and therefore inaccessible to traditional oral methods. The goal is not to produce a truthful account of reality, but to narrate the researcher's embodied experience of reality, as well as how knowledge is produced through intersections with people and places. In the context of design, ethnography can be employed as an active part of the practice that seeks to connect observation with understanding the different ways of knowing and doing (Gunn and Donovan 2016). Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink (2019, 47) see design ethnography as capable of accounting for the ongoing and empirical nature of space, time and movement, since it "can recognise and 'capture' processes of knowing that build on what came before and look forward to what might be possible next".

Pink (2015) acknowledges the challenge in communicating such research findings in a meaningful way and also beyond the language standard that prevails in academia. Another potential downside to ethnographic approaches in general is related to capturing what is displaced, namely, the aspects that might escape the moment or the conscious knowledge of the researcher, an issue that might be minimised by complementing ethnography with other methods (Dicks et al. 2011).

Aware of such possibilities and limitations, I based the ethnographic case study presented in Chapter 4 on unstructured interviews with 15 tattoo artists and clients, as well as participant observation and dozens of informal conversations at the studio during 2020 and 2021. This is a very fruitful setting for a sensory analysis since the tattoo practice involves ways of knowing that are very tacit and sensorial, for example: the machine sound and vibration when it is properly adjusted (or not); the unique texture of each client's skin; the feel and noise of plastic wrapping isolating the material; the visible mix of ink and blood on skin; and the smell of the cleaning products, among others. A sensory ethnographic approach favours immersion in context and understanding of such aspects. The process also captures insights into the experience of clients while acquiring a tattoo — their interaction with the environment and people around them, as well as their relationship with technology, specifically social media.

The studio chosen for this study is the one I work at as an artist. This decision brings benefits such as facilitated access, fluency, awareness and in-depth knowing. In addition, my presence there was not disruptive for the participants, which might have led to more natural and spontaneous responses. However, there are also challenges in being an "insider" in the cultural group being investigated, such as the need to find analytical distance and the risk of taking certain things for granted (MacRae 2007). The theoretical foundation presented here has assisted me in addressing such challenges; however, the analyses are inevitably informed by my current and previous experiences and are not assumed to be objective.

Participants received an open invitation to take part in the research and were fully informed about the goals of the study and how their responses would potentially be used in this exegesis and future research outcomes. Although most participants stated in their consent form that they did not require anonymity I opted for using pseudonyms for all of them and not disclosing the studio's name in order to grant them some privacy. It is understood that some of that information might be retrieved in an online search for my name. That, however, does not pose a problem since the interviews do not contain sensitive information.

Practice as research

Robin Nelson (2013, 8–9) uses the term ***practice as research*** to define "a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice … is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry". Other scholars have also explored the approach under the terms "practice-led research" and "research-led practice" (Gray 1996; Smith and Dean 2009). They all largely agree, like Graeme Sullivan (2009, 47–48), that:

> *In its broadest sense, practice-led research is circumscribed by an equally important emphasis placed on the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process. The locus of inquiry can begin at any of these three points. What is critical, however, is the interdependence of these domains and the central role that making plays in the creation of knowledge.*

By aligning with this approach, this research is *about* practice, but is also more than that. Rather than research informed by my practice or a practice informed by my research, practice and research are, in my process, indissociable. Throughout this research I kept practising as a tattoo artist. The ethnographic work happened, to an extent, *through* my practice since some of the clients I interviewed were my clients and part of the conversations happened during the tattooing process. My routine at the studio continuously shaped this research — and vice versa. Even my forced absence from the studio during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Melbourne was in full lockdown for over 260 days, was determinant for some reflections reported here.

Caroline Rye (2003, 115) acknowledges the challenges of fitting practice into conventional academic evaluations given that "the research may be concerned with exactly those qualities of the live encounter and the production of embodied knowledges which cannot, by definition, be embedded, reproduced or demonstrated in any recorded document". I understand that this exegesis, along with other forms of documentation and communication of the findings, will not fully account for the experience of the practice I am trying to convey. As in performance, every single one of these experiences is unique because they are deeply embodied and happen in different aesthetic and affective circumstances, even when they involve the same participants, but especially when they do not. However, in Chapter 5 I will discuss the ways in which this theoretical-practical knowing can be evidenced and articulated through different materials that resonate in terms of conceptual commitments. As argued by Nelson (2013, 90), "It is the resonance between the various kinds of evidence — documentation of practice and conceptual frameworks — which ultimately makes the tacit explicit and, together, yields new insights".

Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework presents three key theories that further clarify the methods employed in this study and bring together the considerations of gender, affect and materiality that are at the core of this research. Consonant with the methodology, a feminist orientation permeates the engagement with such theories, employing them to contextualise women's experiences and discuss gendered power dynamics. I start from a position that understands gender as socially constructed and performed (Butler [1990] 2006) and is therefore inclusive of all individuals who identify as women and acknowledges those who stand outside of the gender binary. In addition, I support the argument that diverse expressions of femininity are possible and valid, without reinforcing neoliberal discourses of individual empowerment and "choice" (McCann 2017). Throughout this exegesis, and in Chapters 2 and 3 in particular, I will further engage with specific feminist authors and theories that offer a foundation for the arguments being developed.

Bourdieu's theory of social practice

The theory of practice developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1993) and advanced by many scholars after him addresses the nuanced dynamics of power in society focusing on culture, practice and embodiment. There is a set of key concepts that are essential to understanding his approach and which have been employed throughout the study in order to analyse the gendered power dynamics in tattoo culture and the processes that underlie the consumption of tattoos.

First, the concept of ***habitus*** refers to a set of durable and unconscious internal dispositions that shape how an individual perceives and interacts with the world around them. Such dispositions are informed by social structures such as class, gender and race, and are constructed from childhood — for example, an individual from an affluent family might develop a taste for fine art due to their access to museums and art education from an early age, while an individual from a lower socio-economic background will likely not develop such a taste given their lack of exposure to these institutions. Similarly, gender socialisation is entangled in one's habitus, although such a relationship is not necessarily seamless or coherent (McLeod 2005) — individuals are taught to reason and behave through differentiations between "masculine" and "feminine", and these influence how they perceive themselves and their place in society. The concept of habitus is not as deterministic as it seems at first glance: in fact, it challenges the idea that the perpetuation of social differences is natural and transcends dichotomies such as objective–subjective and structure–agency (Maton 2014). This is because Bourdieu approaches classes as constructed sociological categories based on inner coherence and, more importantly, external differentiation. Those go beyond traditional understandings bound by property and labour, since he includes in his analysis multiple dimensions of the social space that are not only economic, but also cultural and educational, considering relationality and subjectivity.

From this understanding, Bourdieu (1984) outlines three main types of capital: ***economic capital*** is material wealth; ***cultural capital*** refers to specific information, knowledge and values that an individual draws on; and ***social capital*** involves one's interpersonal connections and networks. These different forms of capital are subject to conversion — in the previous example, for instance, the economic capital of the individual afforded access to art education is converted into cultural capital. In the same way, knowing the "right people" — social capital — can grant an individual an open door to certain work opportunities that might then be converted into economic capital. These processes can perpetuate gender inequalities because access to different forms of capital also differs by gender: under patriarchy, men tend to favour other men and "masculine" cultural interests are legitimised over ones that are considered "feminine" (Moi 1991).

The forms of capital are also subject to institutionalisation: for example, economic capital is institutionalised in the form of property rights, cultural capital as formal qualifications and degrees, and social capital as memberships and titles. As a consequence, certain expressions of these forms of capital are recognised as "legitimate" by certain social groups, which can lead to high ***symbolic capital*** in that context — which can highlight the differences not only between social groups, but also within them. In accordance, the imposition of an ideology by a dominant group as a way to naturalise the subordination of others is described as ***symbolic violence***. I also employ the term ***subcultural capital*** (Thornton 1995), defined as the knowledge and material manifestations that are recognised as "authentic" within a subculture, in opposition to a constructed idea of the "inauthentic" mainstream other. In the context of tattooing, this refers to the fluency in the aesthetic and performative norms of tattooing as a subcultural practice, as opposed to tattooing in the mainstream context.

These power dynamics unwind in particular ways depending on the ***field***, defined by Bourdieu as specific domains of the social world where interactions take place, for example, art, education, religion and so on. Although overlaps certainly occur, each field has its own set of rules and is relatively independent from the others. Even though there are structures that permeate the wider society, conversion into symbolic capital often happens based on the dominant values of a field. However, fields should be seen as dynamic and the capital as "the 'energy' that drives the development of a field through time" (Moore 2014, 105). Therefore, looking at the social space in terms of field considers the particularities of those contexts and puts relationality at the front: an individual's social practice is "not simply the result of one's habitus but rather of relations between one's habitus and one's current circumstances" (Maton 2014, 52). As such, the concept of field is productive in analysing how the state of tattoo culture influences the ways people produce and consume tattoos and exist as tattooed individuals, and how those actions are mediated by gender.

Bourdieu also refers to the concept of ***doxa*** as the commonsense understanding that makes "the natural and social world appear as self-evident" ([1977] 2013, 164). In other words, a doxa is the set of values, thoughts and behaviours that are taken for granted, accepted without question. Each field has its own doxa, although an overarching doxa encompasses all fields. Doxa is misrecognised as natural and immutable while it is, in fact, a product of arbitrary social and cultural practices. According to Bourdieu, "the best illustration of the political import of doxa is arguably the symbolic violence exercised upon women" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 74), since patriarchal oppressions are often naturalised and even internalised by women themselves. This is evident, for example, in tattoo practices such as the "property of [man's name]" tattoos that are common among women in biker gangs (Mifflin 2013).

Unlike the habitus, which is acquired and subject to change, a shift in doxa is extremely difficult because it is "only foregrounded and made explicit through the interrelation of divergent, novel or competing discourses and practices" and therefore some type of crisis is "necessary but never sufficient for the questioning of doxa to arise within any one specific community" (Throop and Murphy 2002, 189). From this understanding, the positions and efforts that aim to preserve the doxa are ***orthodoxy***, while the ones that aim to challenge it are ***heterodoxy***.

Society has changed considerably since Bourdieu's original investigation in 1960s France and his theory, like any other, has its limitations. Many scholars have advanced the discussion of his work, incorporating relevant analyses from the perspectives of gender (Adkins and Skeggs 2004) and sexuality (Green 2014), race (Wallace 2017, 2018) and ethnicity (Erel 2010) and postcolonialism (Dalleo 2016) studies.
Although directly referencing Bourdieu's core concepts, this exegesis is informed by such updated views, as indicated when relevant throughout the chapters. However, there is one revision that permeates the very premise of this research and should be featured in this section: the emerging forms of cultural capital.

Authors such as Richard Peterson (2005) point to the contextual limitations of Bourdieu's theory, arguing that our current cosmopolitan culture is no longer subject to a cultural elite as in previous centuries. For Peterson, the highbrow snob has been replaced by a more inclusive "cultural omnivore" — a movement signalled not only by high-status people becoming more open to appreciating everything, but also by a younger cohort with such a disposition replacing an older and more conservative one. These omnivores celebrate plurality, consuming both high and low culture, and participating in all forms of leisure. However, a Bourdieusian approach would consider omnivorousness a mark of distinction in itself, which is highlighted by the prevalence of this type of disposition among those in positions of privilege (Karademir and Warde 2015). As much as Peterson defends the idea of unbounded tastes "that cross class, gender, ethnic, religious, age, and similar boundaries" (2005, 260), not all individuals have the cultural competence or legitimacy to perform that way and the privileged ones will do so on their own terms. Moreover, as stated by Jarness (2015, 75, emphasis in original), although such eclectic consumption might suggest a heterogeneity in taste, it "is homogenous and coherent at the level of ***modus operandi*** because these goods — notwithstanding their difference in form and content — are appropriated in a similar manner".

While acknowledging the decline of traditional highbrow culture, Annick Prieur and Mike Savage (2013, 257) offer a more critical view of the eclectic middle-class taste, revealing a self-reflexive process of appropriation. This new cultural consumption dynamic relies on "knowing" and sometimes irony — signalled by the lengthy narratives that accompany every aesthetic choice and the "permission" to enjoy lowbrow cultural products granted by the awareness of their derogatory signifiers of taste. As a consequence, there is "a certain displacement of how distinction is achieved, with less emphasis on the choices of particular objects and more on the way to relate to these objects" (ibid.). Such a movement is clear regarding tattooing, a practice that was once considered "low culture" and has now been resignified by middle-class individuals who assign "socially acceptable" narratives and values to destigmatise it (Irwin 2015).Therefore, in an increasingly cosmopolitan world, cultural competence lies in the mixture of highbrow and emerging cultural capital. As stated by Laurie Hanquinet (2018, 150), instead of evaluating cultural capital in terms of a static understanding of "whatever is appreciated by the upper classes with cultural authority", we need to acknowledge the emerging forms of cultural capital that rely on "a wider range of cultural goods and activities whose legitimacy is diverse but whose combination is socially acceptable and shows socially valued properties" such as "cosmopolitanism, intellectual and aesthetic curiosity, playfulness". Moreover, based on substantial empirical research, Prieur and Savage (2013, 252) suggest that "age, gender and/or ethnicity may discriminate better in cultural matters than class does". In accordance, design historian Penny Sparke (2018, 338–339) argues that:

> *Adding gender to class as a driver of taste formation represents just one step forward in the more important process of seeing other classifying categories of groups of people — including those of age, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, location (both local and global), hobby-groups and many others — as determinants of taste values and, in reverse, of expressions of taste functioning as markers of the distinctive and defining characteristics of those different social groupings.*

These arguments reinforce the need for an intersectional approach to cultural consumption that is attuned to the fast-paced changes facilitated by technology and considers how those shape and are shaped by social dynamics. While most discussions regarding the popularisation of tattoos are focused on class, within the increasingly declassified context of postmodern consumption the other categories described by Sparke are equally or more significant in judgements of taste regarding tattooed individuals. The following theoretical concepts address such issues by illuminating current practices in consumer culture and the practical implications of those in the individual's everyday experience of the world.

Aestheticisation

In general terms, aesthetics is concerned with beauty and taste, and the process of aestheticisation refers to the prioritisation of the aesthetic over other values, as well as the reframing of once neglected things and beings as aesthetically relevant (Ianilli 2018). This makes it a distinct concept from artification, even though there might be an occasional overlap — just as art cannot be reduced to its aesthetic features, aesthetics can refer to a wide range of sensory experiences incorporated in a variety of fields (Naukkarinen 2012). This misinterpretation might come from understandings of aesthetics that overemphasise the practice and appreciation of art, although this is just one of the foci of the field (Levinson 2005). Following John Dewey's ([1934] 2005) understanding of "aesthetic" as a quality of experience rather than a feature of an object, it is possible to veer from the realm of fine arts to also analyse the aesthetic nature of quotidian experiences.

In consumer culture, sociologist Mike Featherstone (2007) draws on the work of Jean Baudrillard (1993) to discuss the aestheticisation of everyday life in terms of the dissolution of boundaries between art and daily life (art is no longer sacred, it can be anything and anywhere), the "neo-dandyist" project of making life itself a work of art (pursuing new experiences and curating distinctive lifestyles) and the sensory overload through media that privileges desire and immediacy. Although arguing that aestheticisation is not exclusive to postmodern culture, he acknowledges that certain features attributed to postmodernism — such as stylistic promiscuity, decontextualisation of tradition, emphasis on desire and a tendency towards cultural declassification — are concurrent with such contemporary consumption practices.

The movement is also aligned with the emergence of the experience economy proposed by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (2011, 12). According to the authors, the progression of economic value that started with simple commodities, moved to industrialised goods and eventually turned to services is now surpassed by the staging of experiences: "while commodities are fungible, goods are tangible and services intangible, experiences are memorable". The experience economy does not imply the extinction of goods and services, but it does position the experience as central. Instead of experiences being framed as an additional layer to traditional offerings, the experience itself is designed to engage customers in a personal and memorable way, while the consumption of certain goods and services might happen as a consequence.

The same is true for aestheticised markets: while aesthetic stimuli have always been used in marketing and advertising to captivate consumers, these markets are distinctive because they turn aesthetic qualities into a core commodity rather than a tool for selling other goods (Entwistle 2009). Such a shift is at the core of the aesthetic economy. As argued by Gernot Böhme (2003), this type of consumption expands the Marxist concepts of the ***use value*** (tangible features that are useful for a specific goal) and ***exchange value*** (the relative value in terms of other goods in the market) of a commodity — it introduces the ***staging value***, the capacity of a commodity to be employed in staging a specific lifestyle. For this reason, aside from tattoos being aesthetic objects in themselves, the experience of giving and receiving a tattoo can be highly aestheticised. Therefore, the concept of aestheticisation is employed throughout this study in order to critically analyse the changes in the ways tattoos are consumed and, consequently, the cultural shift surrounding them.

Featherstone (2007, 13) challenges the generally negative evaluation of the phenomenon and advocates for an approach that considers "questions of desire and pleasure, the emotional and aesthetic satisfactions derived from consumer experiences, not merely in terms of some logic of psychological manipulation". In accordance, Böhme (2003, 80) states that aesthetic consumption should not be dismissed as deceptive based on the "traditional difference between being and appearance" but understood as a "new area of life … in which people today can invest their emotions and playfully and pleasurably rehearse desired life forms".

Such an approach requires an understanding of consumers as non-submissive — an idea proposed by de Certeau (1984), who states that postmodern individuals are not passively subject to a ruling commercial class, but actively engaged in tactics of consumption that individualise mass culture, constructing their public identity and sense of self through everyday practices. Because production "involves sensuous, affective enjoyment" and consumption "involves the active production of experiences and styles" (Reckwitz 2017, 128), aestheticisation makes it impossible to separate production and consumption, blurring the line between consumer and creator. In

addition, for these consumers, "there is less interest in constructing a coherent style than in playing with, and expanding, the range of familiar styles" (Featherstone 2007, 26), which reinforces the experimental and experiential character of aesthetic consumption.

However, even though the aesthetic economy places the consumer as active, it does not fully provide them with freedom. As argued by Böhme (2003, 81), the very nature of desire is to be ***intensified*** rather than ***satisfied***, which can lead to "practically limitless exploitation" when consumption becomes a stressful obligation. Featherstone (2007, 82) too defends a perspective that goes "beyond the view that lifestyle and consumption are totally manipulated products of a mass society" while still criticising the framing of "the field of lifestyles and consumption as an autonomous playful space beyond determination", relying on Bourdieu's sociology for his argument.

The reason that aesthetic consumption is subject to Bourdieusian dynamics is because it is contingent on ***taste***. As stated by Grenfell (2014, 160), "cultural consumption never exists in some pure realm of aesthetic appreciation, but is always an expression of a certain way of being in the world — of taste — and the ontological status this behaviour claims". Taste is manifested in everyday consumption practices such as choices of clothing, music, food (and tattoos) and also in the ways people present and perform their social selves — therefore, taste is intrinsically connected to gender. These practices respond to certain aesthetic sensibilities that act as powerful markers of similarity with certain groups and distinction from others, creating symbolic boundaries that are hazy and impermanent, but nevertheless influence perceptions of status and determine what is aesthetically acceptable in a given context. In the field of tattooing, a certain subcultural aesthetic orthodoxy that once prevailed is now confronted with aesthetic possibilities that rely on mainstream cultural capital, prompting discussions about tradition and legitimacy.

Such social implications highlight how aesthetics cannot be dismissed as something superficial: as stated by Bourdieu, "aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent" (1984, 36) in the sense that it fosters hostility and reinforces power imbalances among different social groups. Yuriko Saito (2017, 225) concurs that "aesthetics can promote civil discourses, respectful and fulfilling interactions, and a humane and inclusive atmosphere. Conversely, it can exacerbate alienation, indignity, disrespect, and indifference". In order to understand how the potential of aesthetics can be used for one purpose or the other, it is also necessary to interrogate how aesthetics is perceived, known and felt by individuals, and the concept of atmospheres provides a framework for this task.

Atmospheres

Aside from its use in natural sciences to denote the mass of gases surrounding a planet, the word ***atmosphere*** has been used to refer to a mood, ambiance or collective feeling. Since it is an abstract concept, there are unsurprisingly multiple attempts to describe and define the term. From an affective perspective, Ben Anderson (2009, 80) argues that atmospheres are "collective affects" that "are impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal". From an aesthetic perspective, Böhme (2016, 1) states that atmosphere is "what mediates objective factors of the environment with aesthetic feelings of a human being". Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 6) offer a more concrete definition of atmosphere as "a quality of specific configurations of sensation, temporality, movement, memory, our material and immaterial surroundings and other people, with qualities that affect how places and events feel and what they mean to people who participate in them".

Learning from these definitions, here I adopt the understanding that an atmosphere is situated in a space, rather than being the space itself. It builds on, but is not limited to, the elements that constitute the environment. It has both aesthetic and affective components, and simultaneously permeates the personal and the collective. In other words, atmospheres comprise how material and immaterial inputs are felt in sensorial and emotional ways by individuals who experience them subjectively and in interaction with others and the environment. In the context of tattooing, this might refer, for example, to: how individuals experience the physical environment of the studio; how they interact with objects and technology; how face-to-face and digital communication takes place; how they manage the alignment or contrast with previous experiences or expectations; and the emotional and embodied sensations of anxiety, excitement, pain and satisfaction, among many others.

It is precisely in the tension between subjective and objective, individual and collective, that its empirical potential lies. For example, Irit Dekel and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi (2017) adopt the concept of atmosphere in the context of a home museum to discuss not only how stories, objects and the situatedness of visitors come together, but also how it enables a connection between individuals and national memory, as national narratives are experienced as personal. In another case, Robert Shaw (2014) explores the atmosphere of the urban night by recounting the experiences of taxi drivers and street cleaners, individuals who are usually neglected when addressing the "night-time economy", acknowledging that these and other actors — such as the night itself — participate in generating the city. As noted in these examples, studying atmospheres enables not only understanding ongoing phenomena but also unveiling possibilities that derive from it. As summarised by Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 128), the study of atmospheres "frames experience as always carrying potential, and thus opens the possibility for resistance, non-compliance or subversion of established ways of doing or thinking about things that have privileged different people in often unequal ways."

Böhme (2016) states that atmospheres can be approached from the point of view of production aesthetics — how an environment can be crafted in order to produce a certain climate — citing as an example the work of stage designers using light, colour and different materials to convey a mood to be perceived by the audience. There is a shared component in atmospheres that makes this kind of work possible. However, it cannot fully escape the subjectivity of perception. This is because atmospheres emanate from the elements that compose the experience, but can only be completed by the individuals who apprehend and rework them through experiencing (Anderson 2009). Therefore, even though atmospheres cannot be designed themselves, individuals are constantly intervening in the circumstances that allow them to emerge. This happens in a professional way, when designers and architects intentionally create objects, spaces and services, but also in a vernacular way, when users continuously adjust and improve their own surroundings and routines (Sumartojo and Pink 2019).

Margaret Wetherell (2013, 229) approaches atmospheres in terms of affective practice, emphasising the "human work of feeling, interpreting, acting, regulating and constructing for one's self and for others" that happens in the constitution of atmospheres. This understanding places individuals as capable of intervening in the circumstances for atmospheric emergence not only materially but also immaterially as they "bring about, alter, maintain, resist and challenge affective atmospheres" (ibid., 235). It is also through affect that Steven Threadgold (2020, 69) connects atmospheres with Bourdieu's social practice: "sensing the 'feel' of a room, the anticipation of what comes next, the understanding of unsaid and historical 'absent presences'" are embodied manifestations of cultural capital that make evident how hierarchies are present in everyday moments. In that sense, atmospheres "are powerful in shaping who is recognised and felt as included and excluded" (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, 129).

Given the purpose of this research is to investigate feminist tattoo practices centred on inclusion through ethical engagement and expansion of possibilities, an atmospheric orientation that attunes to the intimate and unbreakable connection between aesthetic and affective components of the experience is fruitful as a theoretical framework. As argued by Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 129), atmospheres "offer us a route to thinking about how to reconfigure some of the things that contribute to such feelings [of belonging in the world], and as a result can help us move towards more inclusive or equitable futures".

Chapter overview

This exegesis is structured in five chapters that draw on academic literature concerning the sociology of tattoos, design and consumer culture, as well as tattoo commentary from news and social media. In addition, the exegesis uses primary research interviews to develop a case study of a contemporary tattoo studio in order to discuss the current developments in tattooing and how these relate to gender. This approach was important to first situate myself and my practice within the history and culture of tattooing, understanding its traditions, influences and the trajectory of other women before me. Then the case study allowed me to interrogate the space I work in and the artists and clients I work with, critically reflecting on my own practice within the context where it takes place. The knowledge derived from these two methodological streams has led me to reflect more broadly about how tattoo studios and practices have changed and what possibilities can arise from that.

In Chapter 1, I discuss how tattooing in modern Western culture has evolved from a subcultural and stigmatised practice to a mainstream and lucrative industry. This overview of the development of tattoo culture contributes to previous research that investigates the medicalisation, normalisation and artification of tattooing. Specifically, I argue that tattoo culture is going through a process of aestheticisation (Böhme 2003; Featherstone 2007). While *artification* refers to the reframing of tattooing from craft to art (Kosut 2014), aestheticisation places the experience of becoming and being a tattooed person — and the aesthetics of this experience — as more relevant than the tattoo itself. This cultural change is made evident in the tattoo shop; therefore, I analyse these spaces as a way to articulate the different positions that coexist in tattooing today and their cultural influences. The analysis shows how matters of gender permeate the cultural shift and, for this reason, I argue that an investigation from a feminist perspective is necessary in order to better understand the contributing factors and consequences of this movement.

Chapter 2 consists of a discussion about how the experiences of tattooed women might be determined to be different from those of men in terms of autonomy, stigma and the sexualisation of their bodies (Pitts 2003; Mifflin 2013; Thompson 2015). Drawing on the work of feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Julia Kristeva (1982), I debate the female tattooed body and, by addressing the multiple femininities that are embodied and performed (Butler [1990] 2006) in the context of contemporary tattooing, I question the binarism that prevails in the literature about gender and class in traditional tattoo culture. Shifting from the perspective of the tattooed to that of the tattooers, I compare the different approaches used by female artists to enter the field and identify the need for a nuanced understanding of the ways women create their own space in tattoo culture.

In order to achieve this, in Chapter 3 I employ the Bourdieusian concept of field as an analytical tool to investigate tattooing as a dynamic domain in which a subcultural, male-centric tradition that was once dominant currently coexists with a mainstream aestheticised industry with expressive female participation. I start this analysis by outlining the field of tattooing in terms of the actors, forms of capital and power dynamics established prior to contemporary movements. Then I look at the recent cultural changes in the field in terms of the strategies adopted by actors to promote or restrain them, framing the presence of women as heterodoxy. I further the analysis by discussing how these female strategies can be understood as feminist strategies based on ideas of representation (Phillips 1995; Celis 2013), aesthetics (Sparke 1995; Brand 2006; Galt 2011) and ethics of engagement (Haraway 1988; Ahmed 2017) and address potential threats to the movement (McRobbie 2009; Hochschild [1983] 2012). Finally, I argue that these strategies are both aesthetic and affective and, for this reason, can be better understood through an atmospheric investigation of the tattoo studio, the space where the experience of giving and receiving a tattoo takes place.

Seeking to surface the aesthetic and affective nuances of the tattoo encounters, the case study in Chapter 4 is based on participant observations and in-depth interviews in a contemporary tattoo studio in Melbourne. From an atmospheric perspective, I look at artists' and clients' experiences, their interpersonal exchanges and the ways these are mediated by aesthetics through specific sensory interventions — including virtual ones in the social media space. Insights suggest that the senses of affinity, comfort and validation are important components of the studio experience for both artists and clients, and these emerge under particular contextual circumstances.

Chapter 5 further explores these three concepts. Here, I revisit previous chapters to discuss how the findings from the case study are coherent with the feminist subversion strategies in contemporary tattooing and with the process of aestheticisation more broadly. Drawing on literature on affect and affinity (Ahmed 2014; Mason 2018), I contend that affect is a powerful concept that enables aesthetics' potential for change. From this argument, I develop a framework for understanding the affective nature of an individual's aesthetic engagement with contemporary tattoo culture in a tattoo studio, based on the concepts of affinity, comfort and validation. I then employ these concepts in a reflection on my own practice and discuss how the proposed framework can be used to address the shortcomings identified in Chapter 3, arguing that it offers a basis for further studies and practices focused on designing spaces and experiences that seek to include people who would not feel entitled to participate in tattooing otherwise. By exploring this application, I articulate how tattooing can be a feminist practice.

Finally, in the Conclusion I recapitulate the research trajectory and discuss how the findings respond to the main inquiry, restating my theoretical and methodological position, and highlighting possibilities for further research. I take this as an opportunity to further reflect on how the study has impacted on my practice (and vice versa) and what are the implications of this exchange. Based on this reflection, I conclude by considering how the research can inform or encourage other studies and practices that seek more equitable futures.

Chapter 1

Contemporary Tattoo Culture

The tattoo studio as a space of aestheticised consumption

In this chapter I discuss the recent cultural shift in tattooing, a practice that used to be restricted to a stigmatised subculture and is now increasingly part of mainstream culture. For the purposes of this study, this initial review focuses on modern Western tattoo culture, which is the origin of the tattoo practices found in Western countries today. Although starting from colonial encounters in the Pacific Islands, Western tattooing is considerably different from practices traditionally developed in Eastern countries (see Kuwahara 2020), which exceed the scope and scale of this study. This brief historical review is not intended to be exhaustive but to provide a foundation for discussing the changes in tattoo culture and their influence in the studio space, and therefore relies on literature from a predominantly sociological point of view that will later be connected to theories of design and consumer culture. This approach allows for an understanding of the contributing factors and possible consequences of this cultural shift since it unveils the ways tattoos mediate social interactions with individuals and institutions, and how the practice exists within late capitalism.

More importantly, I advance literature on tattoo culture and history by placing this analysis in relation to the tattoo studio, understood here as a designed space where individuals engage sensorially and affectively with their surroundings, with each other and with tattoo culture more broadly. This contributes to a situated analysis that considers materiality and spatiality mediators of social relations. As described in the Introduction, I undertook analysis of studio spaces on social media and four different types of studio emerged from this analysis: the Street Shop, the TV Set, the Neo Parlour and the Boutique Studio, which are discussed in the following section. I stress that these are not sharply defined categories — they can be seen as areas on a spectrum, with many possible intersections. Certain tattoo shops mix elements from these different types of studio or have other characteristics that make them difficult to label. In addition, there are many pragmatic factors that might influence the studio image. One of them is the tattoo artists' autonomy to make interventions in their workspace, adding touches of their personal interests, which might agree or clash with the overall studio design. Another factor is the tattoo style — for example, tattoo artists specialising in Japanese style will often have traditional Japanese decoration in their studios such as masks, *ukiyo-e* prints and *maneki-neko* charms, among other objects. Finally, the shop design is also a consequence of the studio finances — well-established shops with famous artists and the ones located in richer neighbourhoods tend to be more carefully crafted. On the other hand, smaller shops in the outer suburbs possibly have limited budgets and may appear less maintained and curated.

Ultimately, the typology is helpful in articulating the different positions that coexist in tattooing today, as well as the sociocultural influences that make each one of those spaces intrinsically classed and gendered. Artists and clients experience the atmosphere of the studio sensorially and emotionally, drawing from their expectations, previous experiences and the intimate interactions happening between them in that particular moment. As stated by Lee Barron (2017, 171):

> *As an experience, there are arguably fewer more phenomenal moments than entering into the environment that is the tattoo studio. It is a world that can induce the simultaneous sensation combination of anticipation, excitement and sometimes intimidation. It is a creative space that dramatically and potently hits the senses when its doors are opened in a heady and utterly unique sensory fusion of the distinctive disinfectant smell and, more evocatively, the whirring sound of tattoo machines that are injecting ink into a human's skin to form an image that speaks, if not to the world, then most assuredly to the self. Because, regardless of the extent to which tattooing has become fashionable, one thing remains unchanged: when you leave the tattoo studio, the essence of who you were has changed, even if this is just at the level of your external skin.*

This means tattoo studios are also a materialisation of tattoo culture. They make evident in their design the cultural influences and the values they stand for. As a consequence, they are a testimony to the cultural shift in tattooing and can provide valuable insights about matters of gender and class that are implied in aesthetic developments in the field and which are discussed throughout this chapter.

A brief history of tattoo culture through tattoo shops

Tattoos have been studied from different perspectives in many disciplines. There are extensive historical and anthropological records of the tribal and ritualistic origins of tattooing in the East (Rubin 1988; Thomas et al. 2005; Levin 2008; Kuwahara 2020) but significantly less documentation of the practice in ancient Europe (Caplan 2000; Gilbert 2000). Accounts of the modern history of Western tattooing are usually found embedded in sociology literature (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Mifflin 2013), a field that evolved in its understanding of tattooing over time: while early publications often address stigma and deviance (Sanders 1988; Vale and Juno 1989), recent approaches focus on the meanings and motivations behind tattoos and their discursive potential in building identity (Sullivan 2001; Pitts 2003; Sanders and Vail 2008; Barron 2017; Martin 2019). Unfortunately, the health sciences have traditionally adopted a pathological approach to tattooing that disregards much of its social context. Still today, some studies are designed as self-fulfilling prophecies of risk behaviour in tattooed individuals (Carroll et al. 2002; Stirn and Hinz 2008; Juhas 2013) even though some scholarship in psychology advances in a different direction, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of tattoos as self-expression (Larsen et al. 2014; Buss and Hodges 2017; Naudé et al. 2019).

It is hard to precisely define the origins of tattooing since its medium is essentially perishable. Although scarce, archeological evidence of embalmed, dessicated and frozen human bodies, as well as primitive tattooing instruments, is considered enough to establish that, since the Stone Age, different cultures around the world that were unknown to each other developed the practice of tattooing (Gilbert 2000). There is evidence of tattooed people in the ancient West — including Picts, Britons and other northern Europeans — however, such practices were culturally erased by the advancement of Judeo-Christianity in Europe (Benson 2000). Therefore, the modern understanding of tattooing in the West necessarily originates in the colonial encounters between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Pacific region — which is explicit in the origin of the word *tattoo* itself.[1] While the early development of modern Western tattooing took place in Europe, it was ultimately consolidated during the 20th century in the USA. Therefore, still today, studies on tattoo culture often focus on North America, since its development in the USA was (and still is) of worldwide influence and most historical records and scholarship on the topic come from the USA and Canada.

1 Derived from the Polynesian word ***tatau*** ("mark made on skin"), the term "tattoo" can be used to define the act of drawing permanently on one's body by puncturing and inserting pigment into the skin or the image on skin resulting from such processes.

Sociologist Michael Atkinson (2003) categorises Western tattoo culture historically into six moments. It all starts in the ***colonist/pioneer era*** (1760s–1870s), when white colonists had first contact with tattooed indigenous people in the Pacific Islands and took them to Europe as exotic attractions. Expanding to America, the following ***circus/carnival era*** (1880s–1920s) covers the period when tattooed individuals — including white men and women — earned money as circus attractions in "freak shows". It was also during this time that the first commercial tattoo precincts were established. Amy Krakow (1994) describes Chatham Square in New York as one of the first of them — there Samuel O'Reilly, the tattooist who held the patent to the first electric tattoo machine, was one of the pioneers, followed by his apprentice Charlie Wagner and many others. These businesses flourished in New York from the 1890s until the Great Depression, within the time frame of the carnival era. A rare photograph (Figure 1.1) shows the interior of Wagner's "barbershop and tattoo studio" (a common business association at the time), a seemingly small and dark space with walls full of framed and unframed flash designs.[2]

Figure 1.1. Charles Wagner's tattoo studio, New York City. Photographer unknown, circa 1910.

Benson Ford Research Center, Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, MI, USA. ID 81.98.1.

2 "Flash" refers to pre-made tattoo designs that are commonly displayed on a flash sheet on the walls of shops as options for (usually walk-in) customers.

Over time, tattoos gradually became popular among military and working men, culminating in the classic aesthetic known as "American traditional"[3] that marks the ***working class era*** (1920s–1950s). At this point, tattoo parlours in the USA migrated to areas closer to naval bases, such as San Diego and Coney Island, and such connections with patriotism and military pride increased the acceptance of tattoos in society (DeMello 2000). The shop fronts followed the trends of the time, using a mix of typography to proudly advertise their services and stand out from the competition. As mentioned by Margot Mifflin (2013), painting circus banners and signs was a common sideline for tattooists in the early 20th century, so it seems natural that the shops reflected this aesthetic heritage. The shop interior remained similar: flash designs on the walls and unhygienic, cluttered workstations, with surfaces made mostly of porous wood and textiles. Since shops catered to constantly travelling sailors, Western tattoo shops were overall similar even outside of the USA. Images of female bodies were also common in the parlour decor since tattoos were associated with female circus attractions and, later on, with pin-up models (ibid.), catering to the male military audience.

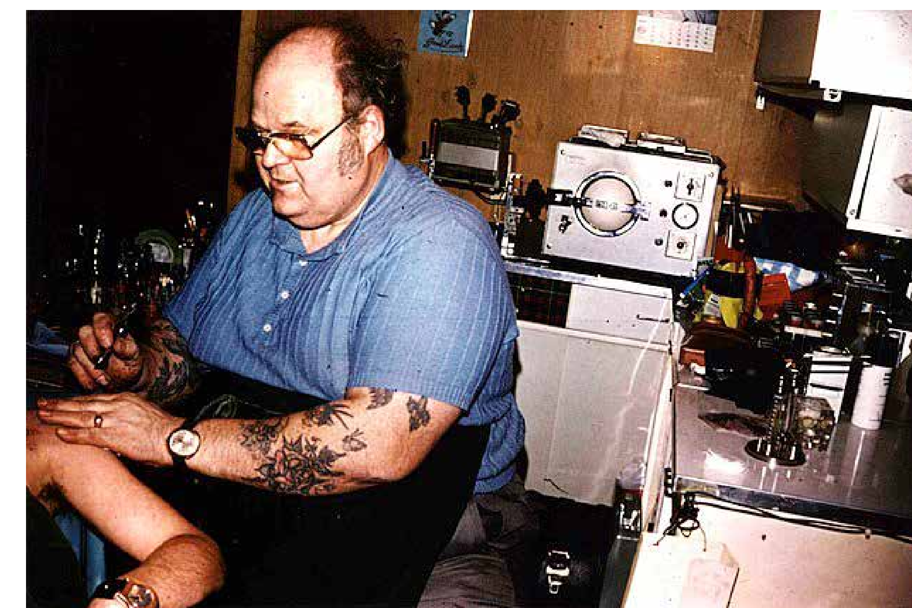

Figure 1.2. Tattoo Samy, Horst Heinrich Streckenbach, in his tattoo studio, Frankfurt / M., Germany, in 1979. Manfred Kohrs, 1979.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Horst_Streckenbach_Tattoo_Samy_1979.jpg. Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en.

However, after tattooing became associated with health hazards and the practice was appropriated by prisoners and gang members, the ***rebel era*** (1950–1970) was a time of societal repulsion. At this point, tattoo practitioners and clients were predominantly lower-class men and mostly white with the exception of the Latinos of the emerging Chicano scene[4] (DeMello 2000). As governments faced health crises such as the hepatitis outbreak in New York and public opinion condemned the bohemian and rebellious lifestyle associated with tattooing, the practice became illegal in many places and studios there operated underground. Some pictures of parlours that were operated legally in the rebel era depict less cluttered spaces and smoother surfaces, suggesting an emerging concern with cleanliness and health in order to stay in business. However, gloves and autoclaves were still not mandatory (Figure 1.2).

3 American traditional (also called traditional, trad or old-school) is the original style of early Western tattooing, featuring simple designs with thick lines and a limited palette of bold colours, often depicting nautical and military themes.

4 In tattooing, Chicano refers to the style originally developed in Latino communities of East Los Angeles, consisting of single-needle, black-and-grey tattoos done in prisons or inspired by them.

It was not until the ***new age era*** (1970–1990), also referred to as the ***tattoo renaissance*** (Rubin 1988), that tattoos became popular among middle-class and female audiences as a sign of self-expression rather than deviance. This shift in audience made safety and distancing from the stigma of illegality priorities for parlours trying to overcome community resistance towards their business, as reported in this newspaper article (McCrary 1982):

> *His parlor hardly looks like the stereotypical tattoo den. It looks, for the most part, like a doctor's or dentist's modern office. Just inside the door is a comfortable waiting area with a couch, some magazines and a television set with a video game attachment. Soft music fills the room from a stereo radio in an inner area where Tiny [the tattoo artist] works. It is antiseptically clean and neat. On one table are containers to sterilize his needles. On another table sit needle holders and their power attachments and an assortment of dyes. The walls are covered with tattoo designs so that customers can pick and choose. And there are several signs warning that those under 18 years of age are not allowed. There is also a sign prohibiting alcohol.*

Aside from the health and cleanliness aspects, which were a necessary response in the context of the AIDS epidemic, the analogy to doctors' offices signals a movement towards professionalising these environments. However, there were still no studio-specific appliances. Even renowned studios relied on adapted home or office furniture. Even so, tattooists still decorated their workspaces with flash designs, vintage and Americana objects that nostalgically evoked the early 20th century studios and were influenced by biker culture.

There are studios today, which I refer to as ***Street Shops*** (Figure 1.3), that still reflect this aesthetic. As identified in the studio survey,[5] many of them have been in business for decades and are often run by artists from an older generation. As such, the decor includes a mixture of new and old objects accumulated over time, as well as an amalgam of visual styles and references, giving it a less curated and sometimes cluttered appearance. New shops are also part of this category and have a similar "improvised" and sometimes "low-budget" look. The shop floor is usually vinyl, sometimes with the classic chequered pattern. Walls have bold colours and tattoo designs on display — some bought as readymade sheets rather than originally designed by the artists themselves.

Artists at these studios sometimes work on bigger projects for their loyal clients, but much of the work is based on walk-ins — meaning that new clients show up at the shop with an idea and get their tattoo straight away, instead of booking and planning ahead. These clients are mainly locals who choose the shop for its convenient location instead of researching the artists' portfolios, since these shops do not usually have a strong presence on social media and their artists don't necessarily specialise in a style. Many of these shops also offer piercing services. They are usually small businesses that have no more than two or three artists employed, located in the outer suburbs or in central areas with tourist influx.

The movement towards mainstream culture was amplified in the ***supermarket era*** (1990–2003)[6] with the consolidation of the tattoo industry and popularisation of tattoo culture in conventions, magazines and TV shows. As tattooing became a profitable industry, a range of specialised products became available for the shops. Promoted in niche magazines and conventions, these pieces of furniture and decor followed a fairly uniform visual trend that can be seen in TV shows such as ***Miami ink*** (2005–2008) and ***Ink master*** (2012–2020), among others. Being on mainstream media, these shows simultaneously reflected the look of the industry and shaped viewers' expectations of tattoo culture, influencing the design of many tattoo shops around the world. This era was also influenced by the popularisation of Chicano culture among the middle class as prominent hip hop artists made this tattoo style mainstream in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lecaro 2019; Oriol 2020). As a consequence, elements of street life culture, such as lowriders, religious imagery, airbrushing and graffiti, also found their way into studios outside of the Chicano community.

I refer to this type of studio as the ***TV Set*** (Figure 1.4). These spaces are darker, using predominantly black and bold colours, with smooth and glossy surfaces. The decor is frequently opulent and dark, with ornate golden frames and chandeliers, big classic furniture pieces and items like vintage clocks and taxidermy. Some have a heavy metal or goth character to them, incorporating aesthetic references such as gory and anti-religious imagery and music memorabilia related to such genres. Others have a stronger Chicano studio influence and look more urban, with elements from street culture like graffiti murals and rap as soundtracks, and selling merchandise like T-shirts, hats and hoodies. Imagery such as skulls, and ***catrinas***[7] or ***payasas***[8] as sexualised women, is common.

Artists in these spaces are mostly male and include those famous for tattooing sports players and participating in convention competitions. They are inclined to do big realism pieces, but also do smaller everyday commercial jobs such as lettering and symbols for a mainstream clientele. Many of those shops are relatively large, employing five or more artists. Some are very business oriented, like the ones that are part of big franchises, usually located in shopping malls. For those, the brand identity is more relevant than the artist's name — there is usually a high artist turnover and these professionals are not famous on social media, nor do

5 Refer to Methods section in Introduction for more details about this studio typology.

6 Atkinson (2003) refers to it originally as "1990–present". I suggest the end date of this period as 2010, consistent with the argument that follows in this chapter.

7 Female faces painted like skulls wearing flower crowns, associated with Dia de Muertos in Mexico.

8 Female faces with clown makeup, a Chicano culture symbol of the comedy and tragedy of gang life.

they have a signature style but rather work on versions of designs that are popular on the internet among an audience that knows tattoo culture from reality TV.

Many things have changed since Atkinson's publication more than 15 years ago. When defining the supermarket era, he refers to the mass consumption of something that was still — at least symbolically — part of a subcultural lifestyle. The mainstream consumer of that era was interested in tattoos as a way to appropriate the values of rebelliousness and uniqueness they perceived to be associated with them. However, since the 2010s, tattoos became more popular with increasingly diverse demographics and many individuals started engaging in the practice in a way that purposefully dissociates from that subculture and its perceived values — which is the cultural shift at the centre of this research. Similarly, the tattoo shop responded to these consumers. While many of the aesthetic elements of traditional parlours are still present in tattoo shops today, as discussed by Chris Martin (2019) some contemporary studios resemble art galleries more than the traditional parlour, being perceived as more sophisticated, sometimes blending nostalgia and modernity.

One emerging category of tattoo business is what I call ***Boutique Studio*** (Figure 1.5). This type of studio is the most detached from traditional icons of tattoo culture. They resemble other types of businesses — such as art galleries, design co-working spaces or beauty salons — rather than a tattoo parlour. They are usually bright spaces and have white or neutral-coloured walls, occasionally contrasting with rustic brick texture accents. Decor is minimal, with many plants, some pieces of framed art on the walls and a few selected contemporary decor pieces. The background music ranges from pop to folk, and some hip hop and contemporary R&B. Tattoo artists there are usually popular on social media and many have backgrounds in arts and design. They usually have a signature style and offer original designs — however, some studios also cater to a mainstream audience looking for designs that are trending online. There is an expressive female presence in these spaces, both as artists and as clients. Unlike the other types of shops, these studios tend to focus less on the tattoo lifestyle and more on offering tattoo art to be consumed by a specific demographic: since the artists have a signature style, they ultimately target a clear audience. Moreover, some of these studios position themselves as all-female or queer-friendly, for example.

These are spaces that Martin (2019, 54) would refer to as "neo-bohemian" studios: the ones that arose in post-industrial neighbourhoods and cater "to the middle class, artists, and students who are looking for a unique and more hip experience by entering an area that also showcases inner-city, urban, and lower-class characteristics". Therefore, it is no coincidence that such spaces share similarities with other types of businesses that are popular in gentrified neighbourhoods — they are all products of the same "global Brooklyn" taste regime (Halawa and Parasecoli 2020) associated with hipster culture. Influenced by the faux-artisan authenticity of ***Kinfolk*** magazine (Bean et al. 2018) and the clean domesticity of Scandinavian design and the ***hygge*** lifestyle (Breunig and Kallestrup 2020), this taste regime is characterised by a post-industrial aesthetic that incorporates elements such as light colours, indoor plants and reclaimed materials that evoke an artisanal, authentic and cosy mood — an aesthetic that is widely disseminated online through Pinterest and Instagram.

Another type of contemporary space is what I define as the ***Neo Parlour*** (Figure 1.6), a contemporary version of the traditional shop. These studios incorporate many elements of the pioneer shops in a nostalgic way, like the lettering on the front window and classic neon signs. Some shops look very retro, with walls covered in flash designs sheets, chequered tiled floors and old leather furniture. Plants and small vintage decor objects are also part of the space, sometimes balanced with contemporary items such as stickers and skate-deck art on the walls — unlike the Chicano-influenced studio, these urban references come from skate punk and hardcore music culture, which are also traditionally white communities. Other shops might look very similar to Boutique Studios — however, they differ from the latter because of the strong presence of traditional tattooing imagery. The majority of artists working at these studios are male and specialise in American traditional or traditional Japanese designs. Some of them are well-known names within their niche. They often use coil tattoo machines, so the loud buzzing noise is a part of the studio soundscape along with mostly rock music, from hardcore to metal and punk. Clients usually appreciate the same lifestyle and are loyal to the American traditional tattoo imagery or contemporary interpretations of it.

Figure 1.3. Mood board representing the Street Shop type of tattoo studio. Illustration by author.

Figure 1.4. Mood board representing the TV Set type of tattoo studio. Illustration by author.

Figure 1.5. Mood board representing the Boutique Studio type of tattoo studio. Illustration by author.

Figure 1.6. Mood board representing the Neo Parlour type of tattoo studio. Illustration by author.

These spaces are part of the trad subculture, composed of individuals with purist views on tattoos. As described by Strohecker (2018), these tattoo traditionalists seek to resist the commodification of tattooing, employing boundary work to clearly label insiders and outsiders by means of aesthetic judgement. Such behaviour usually translates into strict rules about tattoo designs and the attitude manifested in the studio environment, where signs with "shop rules" in imperious language and jokes diminishing other tattoo styles are common. Regardless of the strong expression of traditionalism, in practice these studios are far from the old tattoo parlours. They are neatly crafted and located in the same gentrified neighbourhoods as the Boutique Studios. The artists, mostly from a younger generation, are often involved in street culture and the contemporary art scene, with a strong social media presence. They cater to a middle-class clientele (like themselves), charging high prices for their work despite the working-class pride surrounding American traditional tattooing.

These multiple types of tattoo shops are evidence that tattooing should no longer be understood as a single subculture, but as a sociocultural phenomenon that is part of mainstream culture and, as such, can be manifested in multiple ways. I highlight the idea of multiplicity in order to steer clear of the binary oppositions that are common in cultural studies of tattooing, placing certain practices as "authentic" as opposed to ones that are "commodified". For example, Clinton Sanders and Angus Vail (2008) describe a differentiation between "tattooed people" and "people with tattoos". The former are connoisseurs of the history and tradition of tattoos, collectors who spend time and money researching and getting their tattoos from prestigious industry names. The latter are mostly individuals who are not knowledgeable about specific styles or quality standards and therefore do not spend much time or money on their tattoos — they just want to have one. While these two descriptions certainly remain true today, I suggest there is more nuance to each category.

As discussed by Martin (2019), contemporary tattoo enthusiasts are just as invested in getting one or multiple meaningful and expensive tattoos from famed artists or studios. However, they might have different motivations and, especially, aesthetic aspirations that cause them to be perceived by traditionally tattooed people as opposite to them. This is defined by Gretchen Larsen et al. (2014) as the "stigma of the commodity" — the idea that tattoos that veer from tradition represent an adherence to fashion and market forces and are, therefore, impersonal and superficial. It is opposed to the "stigma of deviance" that was historically attributed to people who participated in tattoo subculture, framing them as lower-class, criminally inclined individuals. However, as argued by the authors, "neither of these two positions fully capture or account for the complex, nuanced, and fluid nature of the 'cultural field' of tattoo art" (Larsen et al. 2014, 670). While many thorough studies account for this complexity, tending towards a subcultural perspective (DeMello 2000; Sanders and Vail 2008; Barron 2017), I focus on the emerging body of research that addresses tattoo culture in the mainstream (Kosut 2014; Davidson 2017; Martin 2019).

From stigmatised to aestheticised market

When discussing the popularisation of tattoos, scholars are frequently concerned about the commodification of the practice (DeMello 2000; Turner 2000; Bengtsson et al. 2005; Kosut 2006). However, as argued by David Lane (2014), research in this direction risks failing to acknowledge that tattooing involves a highly personalised production of a priceless object, making the process distinct from other alienating forms of consumption of goods. Cyril Siorat (2005) adds that, as much as the skill of the artist can be commoditised, the tattoo itself is anti-commodity due to its non-exchangeability, permanence and personal nature. Therefore, in order to investigate these nuances of contemporary consumption practices, I here approach tattooing in terms of consumer culture.

Although not commonly addressed as such, tattooing can be classified as a professional service since it has providers and paying customers (Goulding et al. 2004). It is an economic exchange and has been since the first tattoo shops opened in the 1800s. However, the criticism embedded in nostalgic tattoo enthusiasts' discourses is that tattoos used to be part of a lifestyle rather than a mere commodity and it is precisely those associated lifestyles — summarised in stereotypes rejected by the middle class such as bikers and sailors (DeMello 2000) — that made tattooing historically a stigmatised market.

Stigmatised markets and industries are the ones that face what Bryant Hudson (2008) refers to as "core-stigma": they are discriminated against due to their very nature — who they are, what they do and whom they serve. Examples range from adult videos and casino gambling to social services and plus-size fashion. Angelique Shantz et al. (2019) describe three strategies employed by businesses to succeed in this context: a ***stealth*** strategy involves low visibility and little effort to destigmatise the market, while a ***leveraging*** strategy visibly embraces the stigma and a ***disruptive*** strategy visibly works towards destigmatisation. For example, abortion clinics are stealth by using minimal signage and private locations, while mixed martial arts exploit the controversial image of toughness and violence to leverage visibility on media and casinos adopt a disruptive strategy by reframing gambling from a outlaw practice to a form of entertainment.

Looking at tattooing through this framework, there was a time when a stealth strategy prevailed: in the rebel era, when tattoos were associated with criminality and the practice was even illegal in many parts of the USA (DeMello 2000), the "underground" studio was discreet and disguised. After the tattoo renaissance, a leveraging strategy took place: the association of tattoos with "tough", "edgy" and "cool" personalities was widely embraced in advertising campaigns and movies (Kosut 2006). Yet this most recent movement signals a disruptive strategy in the market: tattoos have been normalised and reframed to appeal to a middle and upper-middle class, as well as a female audience, that do not necessarily identify with the stereotypical tattooed individual. Researchers investigating the phenomenon have recurrently identified certain processes that contributed to it, which I categorise here as follows: the *medicalisation* of the procedure; its *normalisation* through mass media; and the *artification* of the practice.

Medicalisation. Depictions of tattoo procedures in the early 20th century might shock many practitioners today. In the words of renowned artist Lyle Tuttle (DeMello 2000, 79), "it was the sponge and bucket days. You worked out of a community ink pot, and you didn't change needles and they got awful sharp". Tuttle eventually partnered with the Department of Communicable Diseases in San Francisco to update the health regulations on tattooing after realising how poor sanitation practices were having a negative impact on business reputations. One extreme example of this was the ban on tattooing in New York City — which lasted from 1966 to 1997 — due to a hepatitis outbreak linked to infected tattoo needles. Such concerns were only amplified with the HIV crisis in the 1980s and since then the use of surgical gloves and disposable and sterilised materials, as well as thorough disinfection of surfaces, has become standard in tattoo studios (Barron 2017). As stated by Josh Adams (2012), a medicalised response was needed to contest the criticism often framed in terms of illness, infection and sanitation.

Current legislation, although usually generic and varying widely around the world and within different states (Mercer 2017), is guided by the best practices of doctors' and dentists' offices. In Australia, for example, New South Wales provides the most comprehensive health guidelines, including surface materials and equipment requirements, sterilisation procedures and documentation, handling and disposal of supplies and personal hygiene for practitioners (NSW Health 2013). However, adhering to sanitary standards is not just a matter of legislation. Although high health risks of tattooing are mostly limited to procedures that take place at home or in prisons (Tohme and Holmberg 2012), the public perception does not always make such a distinction: a 2015 poll showed that 30% of respondents considered tattoos "generally unsafe" and 22% were not sure (YouGov 2015). Therefore, for tattoo studios evidence of medicalisation provides credibility and reassures the clients that they are going through a safe and professional procedure (Adams 2012). The association between hygiene and health is highlighted by Sonja Modesti (2008, 207) when describing "a protective sense of hyper sanitation" present in a tattoo studio run by two former nurses.

Medicalisation also refers to the aftercare regime that must be followed in order to avoid infections and other complications. The more health-aware artists now instruct their clients on a strict tattoo-healing routine (Sanders and Vail 2008) and increasingly incorporate materials such as breathable medical bandages and specifically formulated aftercare creams, reinforcing the idea that the industry is up to date with best health practices.

Normalisation. The depiction of tattooed people in the mass media has changed in terms of both quantity and type of representation since the 1990s. Restricted to villains and rogues in films of the past, tattoos can now be seen on charismatic characters such as DC's superheroes Aquaman and Harley Quinn, and Maui of Disney's animation *Moana*. Off the screen, celebrities like Angelina Jolie proudly wear their tattoos on the red

carpet and sportspeople such as David Beckham bring heavily tattooed bodies to the weekly TV broadcast. More recently, millennial and Gen Z celebrities such as Ariana Grande and Post Malone have incorporated even the traditionally maligned hand, neck and face tattoos into their fashion repertoires, making visible tattoos not only acceptable but desirable (Barron 2020).

Another important factor in the process of normalisation is the ubiquity and popularity of tattoo-specific entertainment. Since 2005, reality TV shows such as ***Miami ink*** and the like[9] have brought the mythical tattoo shop closer to the mainstream audience. Although the "reality" component of such shows is often adulterated for dramatic effect, they move away from narratives of deviancy and otherness, depicting tattoo artists and tattooed people as regular and relatable folks (Woodstock 2014). These TV shows allow some newcomers to picture themselves having a tattoo shop experience and becoming a tattooed person (Aitchison 2012) and others to familiarise themselves with tattoo subculture without having to actually commit to walking into a shop and acquiring a tattoo (Thompson 2019).

At the same time that the media began to include celebrities and a new mainstream demographic in tattooing, it progressively edited the unfashionable working-class individuals traditionally associated with tattooing out of its discourse (DeMello 2000). This shift in representation helped more middle-class consumers see tattoos as a legitimate aesthetic and cultural practice, which in return strengthened the interest of the media and institutions in the topic (Kosut 2006). For example, tattoos have also made their way into other mainstream goods. Launched in the 1990s, Sailor Jerry Spiced Rum, inspired by the homonymous tattooist, is still one of the best selling spirits in the UK (Thatcher 2021). In 2002, tattoo artist Ed Hardy and fashion designer Christian Audigier started a clothing brand that would become a multimillion-dollar business (Hardy and Selvin 2013). In 2009, Mattel released two tattooed Barbie dolls: a special edition in partnership with Harley Davidson, with large wings tattooed on her back, and the Totally Stylin' Tattoos model, which came with a set of stick-on tattoos for doll and child (Le Vine 2016). Although met with resistance by some conservative parents (ibid.), the existence of such dolls is clear evidence of the increased acceptability of tattoos.

9 Peaking in the early 2010s, there were at least 16 tattoo TV shows produced in the USA and UK alone, most of them running for multiple seasons (Saraiya 2014; Puc 2021).

Finally, social media stands as one of the major drivers of the normalisation of tattoos. Apps such as Pinterest, Instagram and Tattoodo[10] allow tattoo artists to keep an updated portfolio and connect with fans and potential clients from all over the world (Snape 2018). As interactive platforms, they encourage people to share, react and comment on each other's tattoos and keep up with trends, creating particular types of communities (Barron 2020). Ultimately, these digital spaces show the average consumer what tattoos can look like beyond stereotypical preconceptions, and make artists and studios much more accessible to them.

Artification. Although the reframing of tattooing from ***craft*** to ***art*** started with the tattoo renaissance, the movement has become more evident in the past decades. Sanders and Vail (2008) argue that contemporary tattooing qualifies as art based on the features of the product and the production process, as well as the institutional response. In terms of product, they highlight the uniqueness and aesthetic worth of bespoke pieces, their collectibility and how they display technical skills. Related to the production of tattoos is the reputation or recognition of the artists, as well as the collective effort of practitioners and organisations to promote tattooing as an art form. Finally, on an institutional level the increasing interest of galleries, museums and academia in tattoos signals a legitimation of the practice. This differs from the understanding of tattooing as craft based on the reproduction of unoriginal designs from flash sheets, the lack of stylistic variation, the informal learning of technical skills and the institutional judgement of tattoos as lowbrow bodily decorations (Kosut 2014).

As argued by Sanders and Vail (2008), in order to be recognised as a legitimate art form, tattooing needs to detach itself from the traditional deviant connotations, something that can only be achieved by a series of strategic decisions. For example, previously found under the general label of "body modification", tattooing is now separate from that label — unlike many street shops, "artified" studios do not offer piercings. This effort is also evident in the shift in language. As exemplified by Martin (2019), terms associated with the stigmatised subculture have been replaced in the mainstream with terms that elevate the status of the practice: "tattooists" and "tattooers" are now referred

10 Tattoodo is a type of tattoo marketplace that connects clients and artists based on location and style. The app offers curated image galleries for inspiration, educational content, portfolio pages and an online booking platform for artists.

to as "tattoo artists",[11] who no longer work at "tattoo parlours" but at "tattoo studios", using not "tattoo guns" but the less violent and more technically apt "tattoo machines". While in the past tattooists adopted pseudonyms in order to protect the honour of their families (Schwartz 2013), contemporary practitioners often use their full names as an artistic signature.

Mary Kosut (2014) stresses the role of practitioners in redefining tattooing: many new-generation tattoo artists have academic training in fine arts or design and come from a middle-class background. Their engagement with fine art discourses and ideologies not only enables aesthetic innovations but also elevates the status of the practice and the practitioners — the status afforded by their educated, middle-class background allows them to separate themselves from the stigmatised tattooists of the past. As such, the very dynamic of the process has changed: instead of walking into the nearest parlour and picking a standard design from the flash sheet on the wall, clients now research and choose specialised artists, accept long waiting times for a booking and spend substantial amounts of money for custom works of tattoo art.

This means the habitus of people participating in tattooing has shifted considerably — from working-class individuals who appreciate a consolidated aesthetic tradition to a middle and upper class that explores aesthetic possibilities derived from their familiarity with the fine arts and globalism. As a consequence, the field of tattooing has also changed in terms of capital. The cultural capital that used to lie in the knowledge of subcultural codes is now represented in the fluency in trends and mainstream manifestations of aesthetics that can be translated into tattoos. The social capital that used to be represented in the connections with established tattooers is now replaced by popularity on social media. Moreover, the players in the field have now the possibility of turning those forms of capital into economic capital in a way that was not possible in times when tattoos were not seen as a form of art.

Many other studies of contemporary tattooing take artification as a starting point (Hall 2014; Roux 2014; Barron 2017; Becker et al. 2021). Given the academic convergence regarding the concept, I suggest the

11 In 1894, Sutherland Macdonald claimed to have coined the term "tattooist" as a contraction of "tattoo artist" in order to distinguish his practice from the trade business of mere "tattooers" (Lodder 2015). Interestingly, tattoo traditionalists today who refuse the title of "tattoo artist" prefer the term "tattooist".

era of tattooing that roughly started in 2010 could be defined as the ***artistic era***, adding to Atkinson's (2003) previous classification. However, I also contend that, by focusing on the ***tattoo as an object of art*** and ***tattoo artists as artists***, theories of artification miss out on the experiences, exchanges and embodied processes that go beyond the tattoo itself. This is why I expand on these ideas by introducing the process of aestheticisation as crucial to the cultural shift in tattooing.

As presented in the theoretical framework, ***aestheticisation*** has been conceptualised in consumer culture in terms of postmodern everyday practices that privilege hyper-sensorial experiences (Featherstone 2007). Such experiences create potential for staging particular lifestyles and, consequently, work as tools for self-expression (Böhme 2003). In sum, an aestheticised market is characterised not only by aesthetic values such as "beauty" and "refinement", but also by its consumers' constant search for novel experiences that are both sensorially pleasing and constituent of their subjectivity. In this context, the aesthetic qualities of the experience are appropriated by the individual, making consumption a matter of ***performance*** rather than ***possession.*** This is consistent with the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 2011), in which companies go beyond the offer of services to create valuable experiences that are memorable and transformational.

The concept of aestheticisation has been applied to many contexts from "traditionally aesthetic" markets like beauty salons (Chugh and Hancock 2009), fashion (Entwistle 2009) and wines (Negrin 2015) to more contentious areas such as religion (Moreira 2018) and graffiti (Campos 2015). Current research also draws from this concept to analyse markets that have recently become aesthetically complex such as craft beer (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017), legalised cannabis (Huff et al. 2019) and specialty coffee (Dolbec et al. 2019) — and although tattooing has been mentioned by the latter as a pertinent example, there are no further studies addressing tattoos from this perspective.

It is important to frame the argument by clarifying the difference between artification and aestheticisation. As previously described, artification refers broadly to the redefinition of tattooing from craft to art and most studies on the topic focus on the potentially artistic qualities of the tattoo or the positioning of the tattoo practitioner as an artist. Although artification is a relevant and indissociable part of the process

of aestheticisation, the latter is distinct because it implies that *the experience of becoming and being a tattooed person is more relevant than the tattoo itself*. This movement exists within a larger phenomenon in consumer behaviour that makes tattooing susceptible to particular dynamics of social distinction since "the mode of relating to culture may be more important in the games of distinction than the precise choice of cultural objects in themselves" (Prieur and Savage 2013, 258). Therefore, examining tattooing through the lenses of aestheticisation can illuminate social dynamics that are at the core of contemporary tattoo discussions.

Contemporary tattooing responds to the tenets of the highly aestheticised experience economy. As described by Pine and Gilmore (2011), experiences are memorable and personal, and they are sought after for the sensations they elicit. This is why the sensory interactions are an important factor: "the more effectively an experience engages the senses, the more memorable it will be" (ibid., 88). The experience of receiving a tattoo is highly sensorial and ultimately embodied. In addition to the senses that are usually explored by designers — tattoo studios are usually filled with visual, olfactory and auditory stimuli — the unique pain and tactile sensations of tattooing intensify the experience and are often part of the anticipation of new tattoo clients.

Referring to the transformative potential of experiences, Pine and Gilmore (2011, 243) highlight that the individual "often wants something more lasting than a memory, something beyond what any good, service, or experience alone can offer". Tattoos provide quite literally this lasting transformation, but this is not limited to the mark on skin: as people become tattooed individuals, they exist in the world in a different way since engagements with individuals and social structures are shaped through the tattooed body (Leader 2016).

In this sense, contemporary tattooing also relates to the aestheticised economy due to the very postmodern nature of this arena of consumption. Featherstone (2007) highlights certain of these postmodern characteristics, such as decontextualisation of tradition, tendency towards cultural declassification, privileging of desire and immediacy, and stylistic promiscuity, which can all be related to the practice. Western tattooing used to be a male-dominated space associated with sailors, bikers and blue-collar workers. Such tradition has been challenged since different demographics — not only middle- and upper-class individuals, but also women, queer people, people of colour etc. — started participating in tattooing, both as artists and as clients. There are studios today that position themselves as Black- and queer-friendly (Bloom 2020) or all-female (Neilson 2018). With a different cultural capital, newcomers remove tattooing from its deviant and lowbrow tradition and reframe it as something that can be artistic, meaningful, sophisticated and even spiritual (Tsjeng 2016).

Tattoos of the past were limited to the flash designs on the wall, which usually followed a very specific aesthetic known as American traditional. Now, there are a variety of styles available to clients to choose what better suits their tastes. However, as argued by Douglas Holt (1997, 103–104), "to express distinction through embodied tastes leads cultural elites to emphasise the distinctiveness of consumption practices themselves, apart from the cultural contents to which they are applied". This means that the stylistic promiscuity is not limited to tattoo designs — the different "types" of studio environments and practitioners today make contemporary tattoo culture a diverse (and sometimes paradoxical) space. As explained by tattoo artist Morgan Myers: "Instagram allows people to pick and choose, and see that some spaces might be more catered to them and make them feel safe" (Cliff 2019).

For example, far from the traditional hypermasculine tattoo parlours, SparrowHawk tattoo studio in Atlanta (USA) positions itself as an "intimate, feminist-inspired space" where the "vibe is upscale, modern, comfortable". The owners hope "the bright and airy studio will make tattooing more approachable, particularly for women looking for style and comfort over utility" and, according to a media report, the space "feels like it was built for Instagram, with Marshall speakers, fig trees, and shearling throws draped on the white leather massage tables … even the partitions between the handful of tables are exquisite — hand woven felt and wool macramé-inspired walls". (Bikoff 2017). While the meaning of "feminist-inspired" is unspecified, here the aestheticised aspect of the experience is highlighted in terms of its potential social media value. Not only the tattoo itself, but the studio environment and the entire experience become "Instagrammable",[12] fulfilling consumers' desire for immediate gratification.

12 Also "grammable": "Attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram" (Cambridge English Dictionary, adj. "Instagrammable").

Böhme (2003) argues that a key characteristic of the aesthetic economy is the capacity of goods and services to provide staging value, enabling people to perform particular lifestyles. Tattoos — and especially tattooing experiences — can accomplish that function by offering a remarkable narrative that can be shared through the permanent memento. For example, Keith McCurdy, owner of the studio Bang Bang Tattoo in New York City (USA), is known for tattooing celebrities like singers Rihanna and Justin Bieber. Benefiting from this fame, he and the other 27 artists in his studio are in high demand from people who are willing to pay a minimum price of USD600[13] to have an aesthetic experience similar to that of celebrities, symbolically joining that exclusive group. Another (less mainstream) example is London-based artist Maison Hefner, who tattoos his clients with calligraphically imperfect phrases without disclosing this beforehand. Although the client chooses the placement of the tattoo, Hefner is the one who decides, after a 30- to 90-minute conversation, what quote he believes "best represents that moment in their lives" (Geyer 2018). Through this aestheticised experience, more than a tattoo, his clients are acquiring the rights to an interesting narrative that will help them in their active and experimental process of self-definition.

As framed by Grant McCracken (2008, 299), the contemporary consumer "looks for experiences and expressive opportunities that would once have been avoided as a threat to the integrity and coherence of the self". Although not referring to tattooing, this quote seems very pertinent in addressing the paradox between the permanence of tattoos and their popularity among younger generations known for their fear of commitment (Myers and Sadaghiani 2010; Schroth 2019). In consonance with Böhme (2003) and Featherstone (2007), McCracken states that the modernist search for an authentic self has now been replaced by the postmodern act of self-definition, based on experimentation and constant pursuit of new possibilities. This is exemplified by many contemporary tattoo clients moving away from the understanding of tattoos as an ultimate milestone, an image that would be chosen to represent an immutable truth about themselves, instead seeing tattoos as tools in the continuous task of self-definition. For these people, once the self inevitably changes, new tattoos might be added and existing tattoos might change either visually (through coverups or upgrades) or in their intrinsic narratives (Leader 2016).

The importance of the experience and the narratives behind it becomes clear when analysing examples like the two reports by writer Amanda Montell — the first about her tattoo from artist JonBoy in 2015 and the second about her appointment with artist Zoey Taylor in 2021, both for the beauty and lifestyle publication *Byrdie* (Montell 2019, 2021). The first report, entitled "I paid Kendall Jenner's tattoo artist $450 for a tiny tattoo — was it worth it?", revolves around the celebrity status of the tattoo artist and his other clients, the high price of the tattoo and the "Instagrammability" of it all. On the other hand, the second report — "Getting tattooed by a female artist was the feminist bonding moment of my dreams" — is much more focused on Montell's own experience and identity, and how those enabled a meaningful connection with the artist: gender was a determinant concern from the start and on several occasions she linked her thoughts and feelings around the topic to her sensory experience of the space. Interestingly, the two tattoo designs were quite similar both in concept and in style — small herb sprigs done in black fine lines. Although Montell's tastes remained stable in this matter, her aesthetic and affective engagement with tattooing changed considerably.

This illustrates how the concept of aestheticisation can offer a contextualised understanding of tattoos that goes beyond the image or the personal meaning one might attribute to it. More than the artistic qualities of the tattoo work, an investigation of the aesthetic experience of tattooing considers the interpersonal relationships between clients and artists. This surfaces, for example, matters of gender, race and sexuality that were obfuscated by previous discussions focused on class issues. Moreover, it situates the experience within a particular space — be it physical (the studio) or digital (social media) — acknowledging how the environment communicates, facilitates and materialises certain aspects of the culture.

As discussed in the previous section, tattoo shops are intrinsically classed and gendered spaces. Traditional parlours are often covered in dark colours, sexualised pictures of women, aggressive imagery such as guns, skulls and motorcycles, and other elements associated with a certain "tough" masculinity. While this could be explained simply by the overpowering presence of

13 As a reference, most of the boutique tattoo studios surveyed in this study have a minimum charge of AUD150–250, while the price in street shops starts at AUD100.

men in those spaces, other types of male-dominated environments are not necessarily aesthetically loaded with such gendered references. Therefore, the reason for those choices might be in the type of relationship that men develop inside tattoo studios. The level of intimacy in body-related procedures like tattooing requires the clients to be in a position of trust and, as a consequence, vulnerability. Physical contact between men is perceived negatively in patriarchal culture and loaded with the stigma of homosexuality. Therefore, the promotion of a hypermasculine aesthetic would aim to create an atmosphere in which practices that challenge heterosexual masculinity — such as men touching each other's bodies — are framed as "acceptable". This phenomenon has been discussed in other contexts, such as Kristen Barber's (2016, 50) exploration of men's hair salons and how these spaces materially and immaterially create "opportunities for men to feel masculine as they engage the people and things around them".

The increased presence of women in tattooing, both as artists and as clients, challenges those aesthetic standards. Some traditional parlours with a strong female presence can have stereotypically feminine elements on display — such as female portraits representing heteronormative beauty, flowers, cute plush toys and colours like pink and purple — possibly as a way to counterbalance the subcultural expectations of masculinity. In contemporary studios, however, women do not usually resort to gender-stereotypical imagery. While there are some elements of the aesthetic regime of those spaces that can be associated with femininity, certain aspects that go beyond visual materiality — the presence of female artists, the relaxed music, the welcoming rather than intimidating attitude, for instance — contribute to an atmosphere that is not necessarily "feminine", but stands as opposite to the stereotypically masculine traditional parlours.

This suggests that female participation in tattooing can be seen as both a contributing factor to and a consequence of aestheticisation. In order to better understand the gendered nuances of this process, I will explore the participation of women in tattooing in greater detail in the next chapters. This remainder of this exegesis will focus on the Boutique Studio as a space that is representative of the process of aestheticisation and offers expressive female presence in order to examine the experiences that happen in this space and how those relate to feminist practices.

Chapter 2

Women in Western Tattoo Culture

Embodied femininities

This chapter describes the participation of women in Western tattoo culture, both as artists and as tattooed individuals, in history and contemporaneity. By analysing the diverse femininities that exist in tattooing today, I discuss how the representations and experiences of tattooed women are often different from those of men in terms of autonomy, stigma and the sexualisation of their bodies. I also look at the role of female practitioners in the cultural shift and suggest the need for further investigation of the power dynamics in the field of tattooing. Considering diverse positions in feminist literature about the female body, body modification and gender expression, I relate such theories to contemporary tattoo practices in order to make a case for the importance of female participation in tattooing, as well as highlighting the risks of narratives that appropriate feminism. This work is the theoretical foundation for the analyses in the following chapters and the aesthetic-affective framework resulting from the study.

A brief history of tattooed women

In this section I outline women's engagement in tattooing in order to identify some of the adverse stereotypes associated with the female tattooed body, the changes in cultural acceptance of tattooed women over time and how such engagements are constantly mediated by a masculinised culture. Here I primarily draw on Mifflin's (2013) historical review, the scholarship of Grosz (1994) and Kristeva (1982) on the gendered body and Victoria Pitts's (2003) feminist discussion of body modification in order to contextualise the participation (or lack thereof) of women in tattooing.

As described by Amelia Osterud (2009), the participation of women in modern Western tattoo culture can be traced back to the late 1800s, when young females like Betty Broadbent, La Belle Irene and Annie Howard achieved profitable fame as circus attractions, displaying their fully tattooed bodies around Europe and the USA. In a time when feminists were still advocating for wearing pants, their scandalously exposed skin guaranteed their success as both a "peep show" and a "freak show" (Mifflin 2013, 18). Despite challenging societal norms, these women were not always empowered with agency. Most of the time they did not select the imagery on their bodies, leaving the male tattooist in charge of the decision since the performers were living portfolios of their work. Moreover, it was common for them to carry "respectable" iconography such as religious and patriotic images, as well as telling fictitious tales about being "kidnapped by indians" (ibid.) and forced into having their bodies altered in order to spark sympathy and legitimise their career choice.

Meanwhile, London socialites like Aimee Crocker were celebrated as "fashionable", "cosmopolitan" and "daringly unconventional" for sporting tattoos at society functions (Mifflin 2013, 33). Following a trend that started in the 1880s and would only fade with the outbreak of war in 1938, upper-class women in Europe — including royalty and even Winston Churchill's mother — added portraits, flowers and patriotic symbols to their bodies; however, most of these were placed in "inaccessible localities". As tattoos became outlawed due to sanitary crises and lowbrow associations in the postwar era, it would take decades for this group to participate in tattoo culture again. This does not mean that working-class women were fully excluded from the subcultural scene of tattooing in the mid-20th century: during this period, some were photographed nude in a pinup style still popular at the time and showcased their bodies in beauty pageants and competitions in the blooming tattoo conventions. In addition, women who were part of biker clubs also marked their bodies by the rules of that subculture.

With the rise of youth culture and the sexual revolution in the late 1960s tattoos were subject to a revival, being increasingly seen as a form of expression by a young counterculture rather than criminal deviation. As stated by Beverly Thompson (2015, 9), "self-expression and identity politics were central to the women's movement, and tattooing provided the perfect outlet". Women who were already rebelling against the traditional rules of femininity by growing their armpit hair and removing their bras found in body art a way to make another statement about their identities. Following the exploration of spirituality trending at the time, they sought meaning and symbolism in their markings and, much like their coeval feminist fine artists, the incorporation of stereotypically feminine imagery (such as nature themes and frilly ornaments) was embraced as a way of renouncing the masculine tradition of tattoos (Mifflin 2013).

In an interview with ***Pricked*** magazine, Lyle Tuttle, one of the most prominent North American tattooists between the 1950s and 1980s, credits women's liberation as a driving force behind the tattoo revival (Brank 2001):

> *One hundred percent women's liberation! That put tattooing back on the map. With women getting a new found freedom, they could get tattooed if they so desired. It increased and opened the market by 50% of the population … Then the black people started getting tattooed. That was the other big shot in the arm for the tattooing industry, actually.*

But tattoos were still far from mainstream for the average middle-class woman. Mifflin (2013) explains that, even with the body cult of the 1980s — in which fitness, dieting and cosmetic surgery were increasingly normalised — tattoos as a body modification were still taboo because, unlike the previous examples, they were still seen as a form of standing out instead of accommodating the prevailing ideals of the female body. Moreover, tattoos were a widespread fashion in youth media like MTV, being associated with punk rock and other daring music styles and becoming markers of different tribes.

As Mifflin continues, it was only in the 1990s that tattoos became popular with a wider demographic, starting to challenge old stereotypes and lose the shock factor. While younger women still enjoyed the rebel excitement, they might go to the studio accompanied by their mothers, who would get a piece celebrating themselves or their loved ones. Professional women like doctors and lawyers could evade most stigma due to their respectable professional and social status. However, most of them limited the coverage of their tattoos to parts of the body that could be hidden with clothing — signalling that tattoos were acceptable but not everywhere or all of the time, which seemed to be less of an issue for men then.

Today, with the increasing popularisation of tattoos, the overall stigma around tattooed female bodies is reducing and more women see tattoos as a possibility for them. However, with the broadening of this demographic, tattooed women are also becoming an increasingly heterogeneous group, adding complexity to understandings of the female tattooed body and how those bodies exist in the world.

The tattooed female body

The relationship between gender and cultural constructions of the body is a great concern in feminist literature. Susan Bordo (2003), for instance, traces the establishment of a mind/body dichotomy throughout Western philosophy and points out how ***mind*** — and the analogous ideas of spirit, intellect and activity — has been associated with men, while ***body*** — as well as matter, emotion and passivity — has been attributed to women. In addition to the deterministic difference between the sexes, the female side of the binary has also been construed as inferior, which has consolidated gendered power imbalances in society. Considering the embodied nature of tattoos, it is understandable that they have historically occupied the negative side of this binary thought, but then how were they not associated with women?

Precolonial practices of tattooing did not exclude women. In fact, the ritualistic nature of tattoos in ancient civilisations worldwide made the practice part of female-centric ceremonies and traditions. For example, archeological evidence from 2000–300 BC Nubia shows a predominance of female tattooed individuals and designs focused on the thighs and abdominal area, which "strongly indicate that the tattooing practice was closely linked to female spheres of life, and indicate their possible protective functions to aid fertility or to protect the wearer from death in childbirth" (Tassie 2003, 96). For Inuit people in what is today Canada, tattooing was connected with sewing (considered a female skill) and women were tattooed after their first menstruation to provide them with beauty and protection, since they believed tattoos were regarded as a sign of virtue in the afterlife (Oosten and Laugrand 2006).

This is not to romanticise pre-modern tattooing as a free and inclusive practice. Tattoos in precolonial societies were also used as markers of class and gender, done under unequal power dynamics. For example, the traditional Samoan tattoo ***malu*** was exclusive to daughters of high chiefs, who often regretted it in some measure because "the decision to get one was not by choice but one they had to submit to. It was not something resulting from one's desire but something that represented status and a possession of distinction and rank" (Samau 2016, 22). However, while female participation in precolonial tattoo practices varied, modern Western tattoo culture was necessarily constructed as a masculine realm founded on patriarchal logics of exclusion and oppression.

Tattoos were marks of the "uncivilised". Publications like ***Scientific American*** in the late 1800s and early 1900s would describe the style and methods of tattooing among the "savages" of Asia and Latin America while making clear that "among us, the art of tattooing is left to the lower class; so it is a degraded art" (Govenar 2000, 213). The prevalence of tattoos in the white lower class was a consequence of the first-hand contact between sailors and the populations they encountered outside of Europe. But ultimately, as an embodied and collective practice, tattooing was considered incompatible with the rational, clean and enlightened individual. As interpreted by Grosz (1994, 138): "It offends Western sensibility … that a subject would voluntarily undertake the permanent inscription of a verbal or visual message on its skin. Its superficiality offends us; its permanence alarms us". Therefore, those who engaged with the "degraded art" were, regardless of sex, relegated to an inferior position in society.

As oppressed as those lower-class men were by the dominant classes, they still reproduced their misogynistic reasoning. After the popularity of carnival ladies waned, tattooists such as Samuel Steward (1990), who worked in 1950s USA, refused to tattoo a woman unless accompanied by her husband — in part to avoid potential conflict with angry fathers and partners, but also because of their own understanding of who should take part in their lifestyle. As explained by Margo DeMello (2000, 61) "the tattooist, like the woman's other male keepers, took it upon himself to keep 'nice girls' (i.e., attractive, middle-class, heterosexual women) from transgressing the class and sexual borders of the time and of turning into tramps". Since tattoos were associated with criminality among men, the same reasoning was applied to women and when they "are viewed as criminal, it is often crimes of a sexual nature that are emphasized, prostitution in particular" (Thompson 2015, 8). Even with studies finding no evidence of tattoos being common among sex workers, the stigma associating tattooed women with sexually deviant behaviour was pervasive and persistent.

But sexual deviance is not limited to being overtly sexual — it also includes non-heterosexuality. Steward (1990, 128) says that "the lesbians were another matter. Whenever they came in they frightened the sailors and many of the city-boys out of the shop. I did not relish their arrival nor particularly want their business". The gatekeeping rules did not apply to lesbians because they "were tattoo-able, in that there were no angry husbands to contend with, and the women had already permanently relinquished their femininity" (DeMello 2000, 61).

Femininity here is understood as a white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity that was established as normative in Western patriarchal society. As described by Patricia Hill Collins (2004, 193), maintaining this "appropriately feminine demeanor invokes two standards, one physical and the other behavioral", and both of them rely on the idea of women ***not*** being like men. Unlike the strong and assertive man, the ideal woman is passive and submissive, family oriented and does not involve herself with "indecencies". Following these characteristics, the ideal female body is delicate, young, slim, white and pristine, virginal but still attractive to the male desire.

Opposite to those values, the tattooed body approaches what Kristeva (1982) defines as ***abject*** — what is intolerable and threatening to the self. The abject provokes a visceral aversion, a reaction that partly forms how subjects are produced by establishing what is "me" and "not me". The confronting abject body "leaks wastes and fluids, in violation of the desire and hope for the 'clean and proper' body, thus making the boundaries and limitations of our selfhood ambiguous, and indicating our physical wasting and ultimate death" (Covino 2004, 17).

There is a bodily reaction of disgust towards the process of tattooing: the ink going into the skin, the blood coming out of it, the pain, the risk of infection and disease. However, it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4). The exchange of fluids — ink and blood, in and out — challenges the boundaries of the body, the very idea that the interior can be safely separated from the exterior. The pain reminds us we are indissociable from our physicality and how fragile it is. The eventually faded colours and blurred lines are undeniable signs of ageing and deterioration. The permanence means that a tattooed body can never be "clean and proper" again. It has forever lost its integrity and the fact the mark was inflicted ***by choice*** is a reminder of how tenuous and artificial the limits between Self and Other can be, as well as the rules that govern these limits.

This reaction is provoked even more strongly by female tattooed bodies. The tattooed woman is a permanent reminder of the woman who is fleshy, who cannot be contained, whose body "repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety" (Covino 2004, 17). The tattooed woman can endure pain and make decisions. She is not infantilised or saving her pristine body for a man. She is a woman who challenges the rules of femininity established by the patriarchy and, as such, is threatening — "that other sex … a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (Kristeva 1982, 70).

While tattooing and other types of body modification such as piercings and scarification can easily be seen through the lens of the abject body, there are other types of body intervention, such as plastic surgery and exercising, that do not necessarily make the body abject. Tattoos are different from plastic surgery insofar as the latter seeks to normalise and homogenise bodies (Weiss and Kukla 2009). With the exception of extreme surgical interventions, cosmetic procedures intend to "enhance" bodily features, following the beauty parameters of their time and place, as if they were ***natural***. Large breasts and flat stomachs, although unachievable for many women, are physically possible. Tattoos, on the other hand, would never occur naturally on a body. Any tattoo, even the smallest one, will always be ***unnatural***.

Some radical feminists see tattooing and other body projects as damaging to women. Sheila Jeffreys (2000), for example, adopts a pathological view that equates them with self-mutilation derived from trauma. For Catharine MacKinnon (1997), not even subcultural body modifications can be detached from sexuality, those being no different from mainstream cosmetic practices such as plastic surgery as a way to self-objectify the female body. Either way, from their positions tattoos are disenfranchising practices that represent women's internalised self-hatred and inscribe patriarchal violence on the body. However, as argued by Pitts (2003, 75), these arguments "seem to be informed by implicit assumptions about the body as naturally pristine and unmarked", which is inconsistent with a post-essentialist understanding of the body as ***always*** inscribed by society and culture and ***active*** in its transformation and definition (Grosz 1994). From this perspective, tattooing is compatible with a feminist stance because by engaging with it "women are not choosing whether or not to be modified and marked, but are negotiating how and in what way and by whom and to what effect" (Pitts 2003, 76).

However, women do not always have control over these effects. Tattooed bodies cross boundaries between public and private. Karmen MacKendrick (1998, 5) states that "body modification in general serves a strong ornamental function, making the body the near-irresistible object of the gaze". Tattoos not only make bodies stand out but can also be perceived as an invitation to access them. As discussed by Thompson (2015), from stares to comments and ultimately touching, visibly tattooed women often have to deal with socially breaching behaviours from strangers. Such interactions can be positive (appreciation and compliments) or negative (judgemental comments, undesired physical contact). Many times they are ***othering***: either because of non-tattooed individuals' curiosity about the abject body or because of tattoo enthusiasts' appraisal of a piece as "good", "tasteful" and "(gender-)appropriate" according to their standards.

Still today, aside from the general association between tattooed people and criminal, rebellious and risk-taking behaviour (Adams 2009), studies suggest that tattooed women in particular can be perceived as more sexually promiscuous and prone to heavy drinking (Swami and Furnham 2007), unattractive and unintelligent, less caring and less honest (Resenhoeft et al. 2008) than non-tattooed individuals. However, while the prejudice is a reality, most studies fail to acknowledge that the imagery and placement of the tattoos are determinants of those judgements, as well as the nuances of these women's social identities. As Charlotte Dann et al. (2016, 47) remind us, "the tattooed body is always classed, raced and gendered. It is not (just) a feminine tattooed body". Therefore, the different ways women embody their tattoos are an essential part of understanding the expansion of contemporary tattoo culture.

Tattooed femininities

Most literature about tattooing tends towards a sort of binarism between subculture and mainstream culture — positioning traditional tattooing as authentic, as opposed to the commodified middle-class practice. As a consequence, gender analyses are often trapped in this polarisation: when tattoos first started becoming mainstream, the binary was established between heavily tattooed, gender-challenging women who seriously

engaged in tattoo subculture and women who got small, gender-appropriate[14] and hideable tattoos.

The critique towards the latter is understandable in context. Take, for example, celebrities in the 1990s and early 2000s such as Britney Spears, who made headlines when she "added to her sexy new image by getting a fairy tattooed on her bottom", an "inch-high etching [that] sits just above the waistband of her low-cut jeans" (Panton 2000). Despite some conservative backlash, these women were often celebrated for being "daring", while heavily tattooed women were left only with stigma and criticism. Unaware of the codes and practices of tattoo subculture, mainstream women saw their markings as "bold" and "unique" while insiders rolled their eyes at their safe and clichéd choices. Moreover, as made explicit in the language contained in the previous quote, they reinforced normative and sexualised ideas of femininity.

However, since then the reduced societal stigma and increased aesthetic possibilities have led mainstream tattooing to grow into a fuzzy spectrum: there are women who are visibly and heavily tattooed with gender-appropriate imagery; trans women who use stereotypically feminine tattoos to perform gender; women who are tattooed with imagery that is neither stereotypically masculine nor feminine; and gender-non-conforming individuals who choose to keep their tattoos for themselves, small and hidden. These people do not participate in tattoo subculture, but some might be engaged in other disruptive subcultures in which tattoos can be used as one of many possible tools of self-expression. And some of them are, indeed, just following trends and perpetuating traditionally gendered aesthetics.

I do not suggest that women who participate in mainstream tattooing face the same challenges as women in traditional tattoo subculture. However, the use of the words "mainstream" and "gender appropriate" might mask certain nuances that could inform a productive way to address this cultural change. This is important, firstly, because the commodification of tattooing is already an irreversible reality. Secondly, because, as problematic as the process can be, it also offers women the possibility to engage with their bodies in ways that would not happen in different circumstances. As argued by Grosz (1994, 144), "the practices of femininity can readily function, in certain contexts that are difficult to ascertain in advance, as modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes, although the line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one, difficult to draw with any certainty". There are complexity and multiplicity in the way women embody their tattooed femininities and an approach to body and beauty politics that slows down the rush to judgement, is attentive to the possibility of change and holds onto ambivalences and contradictions rather than denying them (Elias et al. 2017) allows a better understanding of the phenomenon.

In referring to women who are heavily tattooed or covered in gender-challenging imagery, Thompson (2015, 39) says that "their subcultural identity is one that is often mis-read: They are visually representing the stories of their lives; however, strangers may read the ink as anti-social outbursts". We must be careful not to deny the benefit of this logic to women with gender-appropriate tattoos as well. Their mainstream identity can also be misread: they are visually representing the stories of their lives; however, strangers may read the ink as mindless conformity.

The motivations of heavily tattooed women and of those who have tattoos that are small in size and quantity often overlap: self-expression, making a tribute to loved ones, marking a transition in life, reclaiming their bodies. Personal meaning is important for both avid collectors (Pitts 2003; Riley and Cahill 2005; Thompson 2015) and casual tattooees (Firmin et al. 2012; Alter-Muri 2019; Dann and Callaghan 2019). The difference is aesthetic: what they choose and, more importantly, how they embody it. That is why in this study I move away from meaning and motivation: these can easily be employed in discourses that seek to either empower or patronise — which is ultimately limiting. I follow Karen Leader's (2016, 189, emphasis in original) argument that "agency resides not in the act of choosing, designing or acquiring a tattoo … Rather, self, identity, agency and embodiment happen at the level of ***bodying***, or shaping engagements with individuals and social structures through tattoos". This is why the concept of the performativity of gender is productive for this analysis.

As theorised by Judith Butler ([1990] 2006), "man" and "woman" are socially constructed categories that attribute particular personality traits, behaviours and

14 While I will discuss gendered aesthetics in the next chapter, in this section I use the terms "gender appropriate" and "gender challenging", following Thompson (2015), to refer to tattoos that can be perceived as stereotypically feminine (e.g. flowers, cute animals, small designs) or masculine (e.g. skulls, menacing animals, large designs) and therefore "appropriate" or not for a person of a particular gender.

physical presentations as normative to individuals assigned to each side of the binary. Gender is, then, performed through the repetition of actions that are perceived as "masculine" or "feminine" according to those standards. Founded in normative heterosexuality, these binary standards are imposed on individuals, who might face subtle or explicit social, familial and/or legal sanctions if they deviate from them. Butler goes as far as questioning the very definition of sex, arguing that even corporeal sexual differences are inevitably affected by gender normativity.

Many of those who defend tattooing as an act of agency and resistance do so through an understanding that being a tattooed woman challenges the traditional ideal of femininity (Atkinson 2002; Pitts 2003; Thompson 2015). Tattoos are traditionally associated with masculinity, both ***aesthetically***, due to the usual aggressive and gendered imagery, and ***symbolically***, for their history and association with recklessness, assertiveness and endurance of pain. Therefore, by carrying tattoos — which are loaded with masculine modes of performativity — women challenge and disrupt traditional ideals of femininity associated with the pristine female body.

However, heavily tattooed women are not a homogenous category either. Aesthetically disruptive tattooed female bodies are not necessarily challenging gendered power imbalances. In traditional tattoo subculture, aside from their many tattoos women often carry body piercings and unconventional hairstyles — therefore performing their femininity out of the mainstream standards. Yet in such a male-dominated space, their bodies are commonly oversexualised, as exemplified by beauty pageants at tattoo conventions and semi-nude photoshoots in industry magazines (Waller 2016). Even when supported by an empowering discourse — take, for example, the website SuicideGirls[15] where women are encouraged to submit sensual pictures in order to celebrate their quirkiness — these non-conforming bodies are still positioned in relation to the male gaze and valued by their sexual attractiveness within a niche (Dann et al. 2016).

There are, of course, heavily tattooed women who are aware and resentful of the sexualisation of their bodies while still incorporating traditionally feminine codes in beauty, dress and behaviour. For some, hyperfeminine presentation can be a strategy to counterbalance the "weakening" of their femininity caused by tattoos (Thompson 2015, 36). For others, it is the other way around: tattoos allow them to express themselves in a feminine way and still exude a desired "edginess" (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005). In both cases, women are negotiating their female identities and subcultural interests, which are culturally constructed as incompatible.

In addition, there are heavily tattooed women who do not conform to traditionally feminine modes of performativity and are particularly subject to accumulated stigma for their "multiple deviance", which is commonly the case of queer women whose tattoos reinforce a butch appearance (Thompson 2015). By "cross-dressing" with gender-challenging tattoos, these women are questioning and disrupting traditional understandings of femininity rather than performing them and tattoos can be appropriated with this intention: "the dissonance between the 'masculine' appearance and the female body is precisely the gap from which meaning is derived" (Crowder 1998, 54).

While from a subcultural perspective tattoos pose a challenge for women in negotiating their feminine identity (Thompson 2018), contemporary tattoo styles can be used as an ***advantage*** in that negotiation. For example, gender-appropriate tattoos can be an important resource for cisgender women who undergo mastectomy. The loss of such a symbolically charged part of the female body often makes women feel estranged from their familiar femininity. Some such women opt for an implant and having a realistic nipple tattooed in order to reconstruct their breast as closely as possible to what it originally looked like. Others choose to keep the scar and have an artistic tattoo over it, challenging the idea that they should try to look "normal" to please others or erase that part of their history (Mifflin 2013). For them, the tattoo is a way to reclaim that part of the body and exercise agency over it, as opposed to the disempowering experience of cancer. It is also a way to transform something "ugly" into something "beautiful" on their own terms (Reid-de Jong and Bruce 2020). Therefore, when they choose to have gender-appropriate tattoos, they are embracing a body that no longer conforms to normative ideals but in a way that helps them articulate their feminine identities.

Transgender women, too, might tattoo traditionally feminine imagery not only to represent their trajectories but to emphasise their gender expression (Aizura 2010; McGuire and Chrisler 2016). Their endorsement of gender-normative designs does not make their tattoos less meaningful because, as stated by MacKendrick (1998, 6) about both body-modifiying and transgender movements, "each refuses the fatalistic view of anatomy in favor of a recognition of, and often a delight in, possibility". And it is precisely in the idea of possibility that the relationship between women and tattoos can be seen more productively. Tattoos are not the only way to disrupt traditional performances of femininity and the disruptive potential of a tattoo is not limited to its size and imagery. As seen in the previous paragraphs, gender-normative codes can be articulated in non-normative ways and vice versa. There is complexity — and often contradiction — in the ways tattoos mediate the relationships between an individual and their surroundings.

There are similar debates about other practices concerning femininity. Framed as a collusion between patriarchy and capitalism to exploit women, the beauty industry has been criticised for creating unachievable standards of physical appearance with the intention of keeping women in a constant state of dissatisfaction and, consequently, endless consumption (Wolf 1991; Friedan 2001). As pertinent as such critiques are, they are also questioned for victimising women as passive subjects and focusing on media and representations instead of women's lived experiences regarding beauty practices (Beausoleil 1994). The question of beauty in feminist debates should be, according to Claire Colebrook (2006, 132), "not so much moral — is beauty good or bad for women — but pragmatic: how is beauty defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marked or manipulated, and how do these tactics intersect with gender and value".

As argued by Paula Black (2004, 189), following the rules of embodied femininity "may result in the by-products of either pleasure or recognition". This can be, in many cases, a matter of survival because "being 'good' at femininity for women can give you value, and to give up on femininity can be to risk losing value that one has accrued over time, which can be especially significant if one feels under-valued in other ways" (Ahmed 2014, 189). Moreover, the rituals and practices around beauty — which should be considered culturally situated instead of always subject to hegemonic standards of white femininity — can create spaces and situations in which people come together, share intimacy and question norms (Havlin and Báez 2018).

Makeup, for example, has been used by women in recent history as a way to "enhance" their facial features in order to correspond with a certain standard of female beauty that can vary according to the trends of the time but is generally governed by ideals of white heterosexual femininity. When considering reports of women who rise early in order to put on makeup before their partners wake up or feel anxious about leaving the house with a clean face (Lavender 2018), it can certainly be understood as oppressive. These women experience a ***need*** to wear makeup to ***feel normal***. However, some women also appropriate makeup in a playful way, experimenting with their gender expression while eluding the male gaze — take, for example, dark and colourful lipsticks that are known to be "man repelling" (Villett 2019). The same playfulness can be found in non-binary people's gender-defying experiences with makeup in their everyday performances (Clarke et al. 2021). These individuals experience a ***desire*** to wear makeup to feel ***unique***, sometimes ***challenging the*** "normal". Moreover, the popularisation of makeup tutorials online has enabled people to create communities, explore their self-expression, share stories and raise awareness about social issues (Kokkinou 2019).

Grey areas can also be seen in the different relationships women have with their tattoos. There are situations that can be construed as problematic, such as women feeling peer (and media) pressured to get tattoos in order to correspond with an ideal of young femininity fuelled by celebrities and online influencers (Dobson 2016) or paying large amounts of money to get tattooed by celebrity artists only for the status (Bernstein 2018). There are certainly women who are not getting a tattoo "for themselves", as much as their discourses might say otherwise, which is evident in many stories of clients who seek "approval" from their friends and partners before commiting to a tattoo design. Moreover, just like beauty, class standards that frame certain feminine tattoos as "tasteful" while others are "trashy" need also to be discussed (Dann 2021).

However, tattoos can contribute positively to the ways people see themselves existing in the world, as evident in the aforementioned examples of trans and mastectomised women, and in many others. After hearing for decades that their skin was "too dark" for small, fine and colourful tattoos, Black women are claiming these styles and reinterpreting femininity as a statement (McNab 2020). Instead of waiting until they achieve the "perfect body" for being tattooed,

15 https://www.suicidegirls.com

fat women are getting tattoos specifically designed to celebrate their "rolls" (Hills 2021). There are women who acquire their first tattoos in older age because they finally see themselves as someone with that type of agency (Saner 2021). Even if gender appropriate, these tattoos represent a break from certain conventional ideals they always felt obliged to follow and often mark an emancipation from oppressive relationships. Black (2004, 189) argues that femininity rules in normative beauty practices "may not be agreed with fully, or may be subtly subverted, even while engaging in apparently conformist practices". In the same way, gender-appropriate tattoos can be a subtle disruption of a form of pristine femininity that denies women even that small possibility of changing their bodies.

Scholars such as Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2007) are sceptical about certain discourses of empowerment, arguing that they nurture a "post-feminist masquerade" that leads women to willfully engage in self-work under the premise of equality only to maintain patriarchal and neoliberal dynamics. Shifting the focus from societal change to self-improvement, women settle for the idea of "personal choice" and embrace traditional consumable ideals of femininity in beauty and fashion that are perceived not to be imposed but elected. Postfeminism's original critique assumes a female subject that is somehow depoliticised, rejecting the label of feminism and buying into post-racial narratives — which over a decade later turned out to not necessarily be the case: there is also a new generation that proudly embraces feminism and anti-racism discourses. However, this movement is also flagged for having been quickly co-opted by neoliberalism and reproducing the same logics of individualism under a superficially conscious discourse (Gill 2016).

Indeed, tattoos can be promoted as a way to make women feel that they are "transgressive enough" without actually engaging in the feminist struggle. They can be sold as quick fixes to emotional problems that have deeper roots in societal issues. They can be one more of the numerous and expensive steps in the mandatory "self-love" routine of the contemporary woman. They can be markers of distinction that position women in certain cultural categories that are inherently hierarchical. They can, at the same time, be more than those. For tattooed women, their tattoos are both for themselves and for others; they make them feel empowered but sometimes vulnerable; they are unique while also trendy; they are beautiful and tasteful until they are not.

Tattoos tell many stories and, as argued by Dann (2021, 88), "in exploring the multiple ways that femininity can be constituted and embodied, we see how it is easy for women to contradict themselves and draw on numerous understandings of their bodies at the same time".

As many have asserted (Mifflin 2013; Leader 2016; Nyman 2017), the embodied character of tattoos makes them unquestionably impactful in the world: the mere existence of tattooed female bodies forces people who encounter them to (re)consider conventional and singular definitions of femininity. While some would argue that this power is reserved for heavily and publicly tattooed bodies, I suggest that the subversive potential of tattoos lies precisely in the multiplicity of ways and the pervasiveness with which tattooed women present themselves today and, more importantly, the ways that women relate to their tattoos and embody them. However, women are not changing tattoo culture only by bearing tattoos — they are also ***creating*** them. In the next section, I discuss the rise of women as practitioners and a very relevant relationship mediated by tattoos: the one between clients and artists.

Female tattoo artists

Since tattooing is an unregulated industry, it is hard to obtain demographic data about practitioners. From many attempts, however, women appear to be underrepresented. The job-seeking website Zippia (2021) reports that, of the 7340 tattoo artists it has registered on its US database, 71.3% are men and 25% are women. In my own survey of tattoo studios in Melbourne (Appendix 1), only 130 out of the 430 artists (30%) listed identify as female and six as non-binary. From anecdotal evidence (Mifflin 2013; Thompson 2015; Waller 2016), these statistics seem credible. Artistic careers in general are challenging for women because of collective understandings of the creative genius as a masculine subject, biased evaluations that systematically favour men over women and the requirement to engage in behaviours such as entrepreneurial labour and self-promotion which are more socially acceptable in men than in women (Miller 2016). Therefore, as in many other male-dominated fields, female practitioners have historically struggled to succeed in the tattoo industry.

In the early 20th century, some male tattooists would train their wives in the craft so they could assist them in the business without the risk of competition, since male apprentices might leave and open their own shops (Krakow 1994). This was the case of US-born Maud Wagner, considered by many the first female Western tattoo artist: although she was more famous for showcasing her heavily tattooed body, around the 1910s the former circus performer learned the craft from her husband, Gus Wagner. Her daughter Lotteva followed the same path, being trained from the age of nine, but choosing to work with hand-poking[16] instead of the tattoo machine and never being tattooed herself (DeMello 2014). A rare exception to this traditional husband-and-wife model was Mildred Hull, a female tattooist who worked in her own shop in New York from the 1920s to the 1940s: her husband was the one who worked as a circus attraction, sporting many tattoos done by her. Hull, a former embroiderer, was popular with both female and male clients, saying that "men rather like having a woman tattoo them. They think a woman is likely to be more careful" (Mifflin 2013, 36). Such popularity made her a controversial figure in the industry: she accused male competition of lowering prices to put her out of business: "you know how men are in any business … Always sort of jealous if a woman does as well as they do" (ibid.).

It was only in the 1970s that women like Cindy Ray in Australia and Vyvyn Lazonga in the USA started gaining prominence as some of the very few female artists in the industry — but not without challenges. Ray, who started as a tattooed pinup model, began tattooing in 1960s Melbourne after her tattooist boyfriend "broke his hand in a pub brawl". Back then, she had to deal with a policewoman trying to "scrub [the tattoos] off because they thought it was a big fake and we were taking money off people under false pretences" (Koloff 2015). Lazonga, recognised as one of the first women to open her own tattoo studio (in 1979) but also for her title of "most beautifully tattooed woman in the world", says the task "was much harder than it would have been for a guy" since "women were an anomaly because traditionally the industry was mostly male" (Rollason 2020). She resents the sexism she faced while still apprenticing under male tattooist Danny Danzl, stating that she saw less-experienced men being promoted over her and had to use faulty equipment because Danzl would not bother to repair her machines, but would still decorate them with "glittering fake jewels" (Mifflin 2013).

16 Handpoke (also hand-poke or stick-and-poke) refers to tattoos made by puncturing the skin with the needle by hand without a machine.

Decades after these pioneer women challenged the industry's gender norms, there is still no shortage of anecdotal evidence of sexism in tattooing. Alison Waller's (2016) and Aimee Cliff's (2019) series of interviews depict many stories of frustrated women searching for an apprenticeship or position as tattoo artists and how some male tattooists see women as sexualised bodies relegated to the front desk, incapable of understanding "the art" or performing good work. Waller continues, stating that such behaviour is reinforced by tattooed beauty contests in conventions and the niche magazines that, on the rare occasions of featuring women, focus on their looks or their relationships to men. Looking back, even Wagner, Ray and Lazonga had that in common — they entered the tattoo world as canvases for the male gaze and relied on their male partners or mentors to advance as practitioners.

It is clear that the apprenticeship model in tattooing stiffens the gender inequalities in the industry. Professionally advancing people with similar social identities (such as gender, but also race and social class) is a pervasive phenomenon that has been conceptualised (Ibarra 1993) and extensively discussed in organisational literature (Brooks and Clunis 2007; Woehler et al. 2021). Therefore, even when not demonstrating particularly misogynistic behaviour, established male tattoo artists often favour the men in their network over women when providing opportunities. When women do get a position in a studio, it is not uncommon for them to be the token female artist, strategically selected only to cater to a female audience, providing small and dainty tattoos that the male artists have no interest in doing (Waller 2016).

Another issue faced by women is the nature of apprentice work. As described by Sanders and Vail (2008, 72), apprentices "are expected to take a major hand in the 'dirty-work' of the tattoo establishment", performing support activities such as cleaning the studio, sterilising other artists' equipment, shaving clients' skin and handling aftercare. These cleaning and care activities are not only considered "inferior" by established artists for being tedious and requiring low skill, but are also historically gendered (Duffy 2007), making the power dynamics in a studio apprenticeship even more damaging for women.

With tattoo equipment widely available for purchase on the internet, learning by oneself or from other practitioners who offer online courses or post videos on

social media is currently an alternative for aspiring tattoo artists (Cliff 2019). However, tattooing involves a lot of tacit knowledge that is better understood in practice and overseen by an experienced mentor. Concerned with this, many established female tattoo artists are now privileging other female apprentices and practitioners in their shops as a way to advance women's presence in the industry while making sure that these new artists do not have to go through the same hardships as them (Lopes 2015; Tundell 2015; Neilson 2018; Cliff 2019). Lazonga is one of these women — her Seattle shop is now female-only because she believes that it makes a more pleasant workplace with less competition and better communication (Thompson 2015).

This movement signals a new approach to entering the tattoo industry as a female practitioner — instead of fighting to prove their value in male established standards, some women are now creating alternative spaces on their own terms. Lazonga says in an interview: "I always had the attitude of, 'I'm just gonna do it, no matter if I have any help or not!'. Now I realise that a lot of that was from the early days of the women's movement where they felt they had to do everything and do it better to prove that they were as good as men" (Rollason 2020). In contrast, young Black tattoo artist Doreen Garner says, "What kept me from pursuing the practice for so long was the fear that I would have to be taking orders from white men … After my conversation with Tamara [another tattoo artist], I went and got my tattoo license, bought the equipment and began practicing on myself and friends" (Cliff 2019).

These different strategies are similar to the ones adopted by women in the fine arts, as discussed by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (2013). On one hand, there is an effort towards recognition and increased representation of women within the establishment — a strategy that might not be effective long term, since settling for limited "gender quotas" keeps the system intact and most women are still left out of these. On the other hand, there is the development of alternative and inclusive female-centric networks that, while important to support and advance artists, might remain on the margins, separate from the validated cultural production. Both types of mobilisation are necessary and exist within a broader structural problem: historically, women have produced disruptive art that would be dismissed or obliterated because traditional male institutions had the power of determining what was "good". It was the rise of avant garde movements in the 20th century, questioning both institutional and representational practices, that created an opportunity for also challenging the gender norms in art (even though they still condition the way women's work is received by critics).

In the context of tattooing, the shift from marginalised-subcultural to mainstream-cultural practice allowed women — both as practitioners and consumers — to not only access the industry but also redefine values within it. Endorsed by a large audience on social media platforms such as Instagram, contemporary female artists do not need to seek validation from male tattoo traditionalists. Distancing themselves from the stigmatised subculture is precisely what makes them popular among their (mostly female) audience, who now feel enfranchised to become tattooed — in a cycle of mutual support. However, debates on continuity and change of gender relations in tattooing necessarily crash into the subcultural barrier and larger issues of power and privilege. The ways tattooed women are perceived in mainstream culture and within tattoo subculture are different but complementary discussions. The following chapter will address these issues in more detail.

Chapter 3

The Field of Tattooing

Power structures and the feminist strategies to subvert them

In this chapter I employ the Bourdieusian field as an analytical concept to investigate tattooing as a dynamic domain in which a subcultural, male-centric tradition that was once dominant currently coexists with a mainstream aestheticised industry with significant female presence. Fields are specific domains of the social world (such as art, literature, academia, etc.) that are relatively independent in their set of rules and power dynamics. Every field has its own doxa — the taken-for-granted set of values, thoughts and behaviours — and the actors that seek to preserve its doxa constitute orthodoxy, while the ones that seek to challenge it represent heterodoxy. While some researchers are strict in defining fields (Lahire 2014), Bourdieu himself applies the term to both broader and restricted social universes. Moreover, scholars argue that fields can be approached pragmatically as a model for description, exposition and prediction (Hilgers and Mangez 2014) and that different contexts would benefit from being analysed as a field even if not strictly qualifying as one (Threadgold 2020). I frame traditional and contemporary tattooing not as different fields but as different positions within the same field, since both movements coexist and are subject to interactions with each other and with other fields in society.

Some feminist scholars are sceptical about the suitability of Bourdieu's theories in analysing gender for being too deterministic and accounting for a type of reflexivity that only reworks traditional conceptions of gender (Butler 1999; Adkins 2002). Others recognise a more complex and open relationship between habitus and field (McNay 1999), seeing potential in the "agentic dimensions of the habitus and their possibilities for wider social change" (Reay 2015, 22). Here I adopt Julie McLeod's view that "the more pressing political and analytical challenge is attempting to theorise both change ***and*** continuity, invention ***and*** repetition, and understanding the forms they take today" instead of focusing on the "cultural reproduction versus cultural resistance" dispute (2005, 24, emphasis in original). Therefore, like other researchers (Nentwich et al. 2015; lisahunter 2018; Leaney 2019), I seek a dialogue between a Bourdieusian approach that addresses the material and historical conditions of the power relations in a field and a critical feminist perspective that seeks to understand the potential of embodied and everyday actions in disrupting the norms of that field.

The doxa of traditional tattooing

I start this analysis by outlining the field of tattooing in terms of the actors, forms of capital and power dynamics established prior to contemporary movements. I acknowledge the existence of different subcultures within traditional tattooing, but I argue that they come under the same doxa as traditional tattoo culture.[17] Moreover, this part of the analysis does not contemplate contemporary practices that embrace a nostalgic traditional tattoo aesthetic without necessarily sharing its values.

As outlined in previous chapters, the establishment of tattooing in the West in the late 19th century reflected the patriarchal and colonial values of the time. As a result, women were either excluded or objectified and the tattoo practices of non-white populations were positioned as primitive and separate from Western tattoo culture. Therefore, to analyse the actors in the field is firstly to acknowledge the underrepresentation of women and people of colour — both as consumers and, especially, as practitioners.

Male tattooists sit in a position of power within the field due to their role as cultural gatekeepers. These men are responsible for the perpetuation of intra-field stigma and "rules" that dictate how people are allowed to participate (or not) in tattoo culture as clients. For example, many tattooists refuse to do colour tattoos on Black skin and claim that it is a harder "surface" to work with (Fernando 2021). Evidence of this behaviour is clear on TV shows like ***Ink master***, in which participants openly complain when they are assigned clients with a darker skin colour (Aran 2015). Misogynistic behaviour is also pervasive: male artists feel entitled to decide what types of design, sizes and placements they consider "appropriate" for women. Sometimes guised as "expert advice", these decisions are not really a matter of feasibility or quality of the outcome, but gendered expectations — some shops even have separate flash sheets for women (Steward 1990; Santos 2015).

Representing the majority of shop owners and established practitioners, men also restrict the entry

17 As discussed in Chapter 1, Western tattoo culture is heavily influenced by the developments of tattooing in the USA in the last half of the 20th century, when American traditional, Chicano and eventually irezumi styles came together to establish the tattoo industry. The 2013 documentary Tattoo nation by Eric Schwartz describes in detail how this movement took place.

of new artists into the industry. As discussed in the previous chapter, men usually advance their male peers through apprenticeships, while women lack this kind of social capital and are many times resigned to being shop assistants (Waller 2016). When they do find a position as artists, women are often subject to unequal treatment in comparison to their male counterparts and even face harassment (Tundel 2015; Fagan 2020). This is not to say that women do not find their way as successful artists and create their spaces of resistance within the subculture. Through what Bourdieu calls the "logic of practice" (1998) — the knowledge of explicit and implicit rules, values and forms of capital — they are able to make sense of the field and negotiate their presence in it. This is the case, for example, of female artists who downplay their gender to keep the focus on their work (Thompson 2019, 312) or, in an opposite movement, explore their gender identity to stand out in all-male studios.

This knowledge of which practices and discourses are appropriate in certain contexts makes room for actors to succeed within the field. However, Bourdieu also outlines the reflexive and restrictive relation between one's practice and the field, represented by the ways people embody and enact the prevailing values and dispositions. As exemplified by Webb et al. (2002, 50), even if a football player is a polite and timid person, in order to succeed on the field they will "'naturally' perform in a more assertive manner" — they cannot simply refuse to be competitive, avoid tackling another player or apologise for every collision. In the context of traditional tattooing, it is common for women to follow a certain aesthetic and embody the tough and rebellious attitude expected by their male counterparts. While for many of them this can be a genuine form of self-expression, what is in question here is not a matter of individual motivation or personal identification — but the fact that the possibilities are limited by the constraints of the field.

Analysing surfing, lisahunter (2016, 192) alerts us to a superficial perception of gender equity, noting that female legitimation in the field is often conditioned by a sexualised heteronormative presentation — the "babe factor". For the author, such behaviour "acts as symbolic violence,[18] misrecognised for capital that may be traded for resources that enhance performance, for example in the form of sponsorship as economic capital". This is a similar situation to the female participation in traditional tattoo culture: a few prominent artists like Kat Von D,[19] Megan Massacre[20] and Ryan Ashley Malarkey[21] are embraced as symbols of "female empowerment" in the field (Preston 2021) while their legitimation is largely conditioned by their appearance and attractiveness — a standard that does not apply to men, who are praised for their skills.

While having women in the spotlight might seem like an advance, such aesthetic standards can be oppressive for those who do not possess the same "bodily capital" (Wacquant 1995) or have no interest in exploring theirs in the same way. As highlighted by Thompson (2015), not all women who are heavily tattooed adhere to heteronormative, oversexualised standards. As a consequence, many female artists do not feel represented by these "sex symbols" and, in fact, resent them — or at least their representation in the media — for the unrealistic expectations they promote (Wahler 2016; Thompson 2019). Such animosity sustains a binarism between "objectified" and "rebellious", hyperfeminine and femininity-defying — which is part of a longstanding debate between feminists (Hoskin 2017) and here results in competitive behaviour that undermines attempts to shift gendered power imbalances in the field.

This shows how, regardless of individual positions, the doxa of traditional tattoo culture seems at odds with collective female empowerment. And despite its strong historical component, it is not a matter in the past — orthodoxy is sustained by major players in the field today. For example, ***Inked*** magazine, one of the most relevant media companies in tattooing, continues to promote "Inked Girl of the Week",[22] an online segment that reposts Instagram pictures of semi-nude, heavily tattooed women, and "Cover Girl Competition",[23] a yearly beauty pageant that offers a cash prize and a feature on the printed magazine cover. The profile of 2021 winner Jessica Carter says: "After being told that she was too tattooed to model by so many, she is determined to make a name for herself on her own terms and to carve her own unique path in the industry." This common discourse of empowerment ties heavily tattooed bodies to non-conformity with mainstream culture. However, the four finalists in the 2021 beauty contest were all thin, blonde, white women with large breasts — which puts into question to what extent they are really challenging norms and doing things "on their own terms". As discussed by Dann et al. (2016), their embodied aesthetic is disruptive in relation to certain mainstream beauty standards that privilege the immaculate female body, but still conforms to mainstream ideals of sexual attractiveness, as well as to the oversexualised parameters of the field.

This conflict is not limited to representations of femininity. Although there is less emphasis on the sexualisation of tattooed male bodies, the types of masculinity they promote can also be seen as both disruptive and traditional. The deviant aspects of masculinity they represent — such as the embodied, lower-class, uneducated criminal — are rejected by mainstream morals. However, in terms of performing gender these men are hardly disruptive: due to historical and social associations, traditional tattoos reinforce symbolic values such as toughness, independence and assertive attitudes — which are connected with normative expressions of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The use of tattoos to perform these ideals of masculinity can be found in hip hop (Brown 2006), Chicano (Flores 2016) and far-Right communities (Miller-Idriss 2017). Moreover, the presence and appreciation of heavily tattooed men in team sports, for example, weaken the moral stigma while reinforcing the representations of normative masculinity (Walzer and Sanjurjo 2016).

Indeed, tensions and contradictions arise when analysing the field of traditional tattoo culture in relation to wider societal power dynamics. The stigma that mainstream society puts upon certain people participating in traditional tattoo culture — including criminality, deviancy and promiscuity, among others — characterises symbolic violence and can have a negative impact on the individual's self-esteem, relationships and working opportunities (Dickson et al. 2014; Zestcott et al. 2018). However, those same attributes can work as valuable symbolic capital within the field. For example, British tattoo model Billy Huxley[24] has no gang affiliation but his public persona revolves around the North American biker stereotype and his clothing brand is promoted online with captions such as "rogues & rejects" and "sinners only".[25] In the case of women, many now proudly reclaim sexualised labels. Take, for instance, Plop, a heavily tattooed internet celebrity who describes herself on social media as a "published tattoo model, drunk twitch affiliate, professional IG thot"[26] and successfully exchanges her bodily capital for economic capital by doing erotic photoshoots and live streaming.

Just like beauty as discussed in the last chapter, there is extensive debate in feminist literature on whether or not female sexuality can be construed as a way to liberation. I here follow recent debates that seek a posture that is "'sex positive but anti-sexism", focused on a "political rather than a moral sensibility about sex" (Gill and Orgad 2018, 1317). In this sense, while women should have autonomy in how they explore their sexuality and one can indeed use sexual desirability as a means of individual empowerment, this is unfruitful as a collective strategy for female advancement ***when still coupled with restrictive aesthetic standards***. Beauty and sexual appeal in their traditional heteronormative understandings — which is the case of models like Plop — are not resources available to all women, since such judgements are embedded in structures of race, class, age and ability, and the "power" of these assets is highly contextual. Taking those factors into account, such an approach is "ephemeral and unsustainable" and "does little to unsettle the larger structures of gender inequality" (Green 2013, 152).

The issues with stigmatisation of tattooed people in mainstream society and class differences have been widely addressed in the literature (DeMello 2000; Pitts 2003; Thompson 2015; Dann 2021). Nonetheless, the focus on oppressive forces from outside the field cannot mask inequalities within the field. As pointed out by Garland (2020):

> *The prevailing figure of the "white male outcast" is one that often shuts down conversation in tattooing, as a high proportion of men in the industry come from difficult or working class backgrounds, and generally tend to view themselves as being left-leaning or anti-establishment. Many seem to find it difficult to reconcile what's stacked against them with their capacity to inflict harm on others. When pulled up, they get defensive — and so do their fans. The exact same problem can be seen within alternative*

18 As presented in the theoretical framework, the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence refers to the imposition of an ideology by a dominant group as a way to naturalise the subordination of others.

19 Female artist who was the protagonist of reality TV show *LA ink*, later launching a makeup brand and her singing career.

20 Female artist who starred in the reality TV shows *NY ink, America's worst tattoos* and *Bondi ink.*

21 The first female artist to win the reality TV show *Ink master* (after eight seasons).

22 https://www.inkedmag.com/tag/inked-girl-of-the-week

23 https://cover.inkedmag.com/

24 https://www.instagram.com/billyhuxley/

25 https://www.instagram.com/velvet_highway/

26 https://twitter.com/plopfictionally

music scenes, which the tattoo industry overlaps with, as hardcore, punk and metal communities continue to be rife with abuse, and dominated by white men.

Although the racial demographics can vary within specific tattoo communities, white men still account for the majority of tattoo artists and there is a predominance of men in positions of power and visibility within the field. Owners and CEOs of some of the largest tattoo supplies companies are white men[27] — one of them, Gaston Siciliano of FK Irons, was recently exposed for his racist remarks on social media (Mao 2021). In the name of tradition, there is an established reverence for white male artists such as Sailor Jerry, who is known for his racist and sexist remarks (Hardy and Selvin 2013), and a romanticised view of biker culture, which is long connected to conservative values regarding diversity (McBee 2015). Therefore, despite the working-class beginnings of Western tattooing, ultimately the same power structures that promote racism, sexism and misogyny in wider society are reproduced within the field.

Women in tattooing as heterodoxy

For the second part of this analysis, I look at the recent cultural changes in the field and the strategies adopted by actors to promote or restrain them. According to Bourdieu (1993, 72), there is a struggle in every field "between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who will try to defend the monopoly and keep out competition." In this struggle, those attempting to preserve the doxa (orthodoxy) will employ ***conservation*** strategies, while those attempting to question it (heterodoxy) will resort to ***subversion*** strategies. Although the presence of women in tattooing is not new and there are women who side with orthodoxy (as well as heterodox men), here I frame women as the "newcomers" by focusing on the female forms of participation that configure heterodoxy within the field — which often overlap with the participation of queer and racially diverse people as well.

The very presence of women who challenge the expectations of traditional tattoo subculture is in itself a subversion strategy. Representation in numbers and diversity makes it possible for more women to identify themselves in that space. Women are taking part in the cultural shift in tattooing both as artists and as clients: as explained by Bourdieu (1996, 207), changes in power relations that lead to radical transformation within a field are "made possible by the intersection between the subversive intentions of a section of producers and the expectations of a section of the public (internal and external)". This means culture-changing female artists are only able to succeed with the support of an (expressly female) audience that shares their desire to subvert the field.

Many artists are aware of this reciprocity and are motivated by a desire to make people "feel good" in a way they did not feel in their previous experiences with traditional tattoo culture (Neilson 2018; Specter 2021). Such an attitude softens the hierarchical divide between artist and client — which is noticeable in the words of many others who say that female artists are gentler, better listeners, more polite and less judgemental (Tundel 2015; McGinn 2018; Argosino 2021). This is in stark contrast to the tough and intimidating attitude that is fostered in traditional tattoo parlours.

The change of behaviour is also noticeable in the relationship between artists. From historical accounts of tattooists sabotaging their competitors' flash designs and machines to bikers bombing parlours, tattooing is a traditionally competitive culture (DeMello 2000, 21, 52; Thompson 2015, 130). Due to the limited market, tattooists often discouraged and undermined each other, an attitude that is still found today (Callahan 2020). In that context, women also found themselves pitted against each other, some refusing to have another female artist in the shop (Morrow 2019). However, the newcomers subverted that dynamic: they have created a much more cooperative culture in which women feel comfortable sharing professional advice and supporting and promoting each other (Callahan 2020; Argosino 2021).

Another subversion strategy employed by women relates to the aesthetic possibilities, in terms of both the studio and the tattoo design itself. Female artists bring more alternatives to the traditional tattoo spaces and themes, in ways that both reinforce and challenge conventional gendered aesthetics. For some women, disrupting the male-centred field means offering small, delicate and "feminine" designs that would not usually interest or be approved by a male artist (Waller 2016; Duberman 2018). Many traditional tattooists refuse to do tattoos without a bold black outline and scorn small pieces. On the other hand, female artists also offer the possibility of challenging gender stereotypes: women see and understand the female body in a different way compared to male artists, who, through their male gaze, tend to sexualise it and propose designs or placements that reinforce their heteronormative expectations of a tattooed woman. For example, Santos's (2015) study of the LA Chicano community exposes how male artists instruct women to tattoo parts of the body that would "please their men", label them "whores" or "lesbians" when sporting too large or too visible tattoos and refuse to tattoo them with words like "fuck".

This relates to another important subversion: women make tattooing ***safer*** for other women. The recent #MeToo movement in tattooing surfaced countless stories of women who have been sexually harassed and assaulted in tattoo studios worldwide: the USA (Merlan 2018), Canada (Latimer 2020), France (Valdayron 2021) and the UK (Garland 2020) are just some examples. Therefore, female clients understandably declare they feel more comfortable dealing with women as tattoo artists in relation to their bodies, especially when getting tattoos in more intimate places, since the partial removal of clothes and direct physical contact are unavoidable.

However, such strategies are met with resistance. For example, when questioned about complaints of sexual misconduct in tattoo shops, the president of France's Syndicat National des Tatoueurs (which translates to National Union of Tattooists, even though it does not qualify as a worker's union) said it was not their role to create a code of ethics for the practice, claiming that none of the members had ever complained about sexual harassment (Garaicoechea 2021). It is pertinent to mention that this man, the famous artist Cyril "Tin Tin" Auville, was himself accused of sexual harassment and abusive behaviour by multiple people (Valdayron 2021).

Denial and discredit are usual conservation strategies in response to women claiming to be mistreated in the industry. For example, US-based artist Shanzey Afzal was interviewed about her project Ink Mink, a vintage-trailer tattoo shop that prioritised women and non-binary customers (Insider 2020). The hundreds of comments about the video, mostly made by men, claim that she is "discriminating against men", "making up oppression" and there are no gender issues in tattooing "if you are good", aside from other personal insults. Soon after that, likely as a consequence of the backlash, Afzal closed her business and disappeared from social media.

Discouragement of newcomers is a common discourse in conservation strategies. For example, stating that tattooing is currently going "in the wrong direction", veteran artist Henk Schiffmacher misses the days when the practice was limited to a few hundred tattooers and gives the following advice to aspiring artists: "go to a hardware store, buy a hammer and destroy your tattoo machine" (Lessmoellmann 2020). This opinion is not exclusive to old-timers: from a younger generation, Ross K. Jones says that even though he had a "good friend" who "had the same respect and passion for real tattooing" as an apprentice, he would not teach someone again because "there are way too many tattooers in the world now and I would rather not add to the oversaturation of our craft" (Tttism 2018).

Another conservation strategy is the aesthetic discredit of tattoo styles and techniques that escape the canon of American traditional, Chicano and ***irezumi***.[28] Following the motto "bold will hold" (Cake 2020), tattoo traditionalists argue that other types of tattoos will not stand the test of time in terms of execution and visual trends — fine lines, hand-poke and lighter colours will fade too much and non-traditional styles will become dated. Although not necessarily targeted at women, this type of criticism often overlaps with the work of female newcomer artists. For example, the description of the "Traditional American Tattoos" community on social platform Reddit says: "A blossom-tree and bird-silhouette free zone for enthusiasts of the traditional American style of tattooing"[29] — making a sneering reference to some designs that are popular with a female audience.

Finally, there is the "lifestyle" discredit. Traditionalists differentiate between "tattooed people" and "people with tattoos" (Sanders and Vail 2008), the former being committed collectors who are part of the subculture, while the latter include those who acquire tattoos more casually, usually small and few. These people

27 For example, Australian brand Inkjecta (https://inkjecta.com/pages/about-us), German brand Cheyenne (https://cheyennetattoo.com/en/about-cheyenne/cheyenne-team), US brands FK Irons (https://www.fkirons.com/pages/about-us), Intenze Ink (https://intenzetattooink.com/pages/our-history) and Eternal Ink (https://eternaltattooink.com/?act=view&page=Making%20Ink%20History).

28 Irezumi is a term used to refer broadly to Japanese styles of tattooing. The style was developed in the East but found legitimacy in the West after prominent tattoo artists in the 1970s such as Ed Hardy studied and incorporated the practice into their own (Hardy and Selvin 2013).

29 https://www.reddit.com/r/traditionaltattoos

are, in their view, responsible for the loss of tattoo's value as a marker of deviancy — a judgement that has been defined as the "stigma of the commodity" (Larsen et al. 2014). Returning to Schiffmacher's words, he takes pride in the days of tattooing in "basements in red light districts" and laments that "now you go to some Barber Store to a woman with a beard who will tattoo you strange symbols or there will be a lady who doesn't comb her hair who will handpoke you. It's strange" (Lessmoellmann 2020). Again, even though this criticism is not necessarily directed towards women, it is tinted with misogyny and targeted at practices with female participation.

Turning a subcultural practice into mainstream always implies some form of commodification. This is true of clubbing (Hae 2012), skateboarding (Atencio et al. 2018), and graffiti (Schacter 2014), for example. In tattooing, this usually means the erasure of its working-class origins, appropriation of narratives of exoticism and deviancy, and use of tattoos as indicators of status and class, issues that have been thoroughly discussed in the literature, most prominently by DeMello (2000) and several other scholars (Irwin 2003; Halnon and Cohen 2006; Kosut 2006).

Nonetheless, if it were solely a matter of working-class cultural appropriation, the criticism of tattoo traditionalists would be directed towards middle- and upper-class individuals who appropriate the aesthetics and codes of traditional tattoo subculture. However, such individuals are often embraced because they ultimately sustain the orthodoxy of the field and become vocal critics of contemporary tattoos themselves. Take, for example, the aforementioned Ross K. Jones — the American traditional artist is open about his happy and artistic middle-class childhood, his fine arts training in Europe and the encouraging teachers during his university degree. However, he is strict about what can be considered a "good, classic, timeless traditional design" based on the working-class tradition and dismisses studios that look like "a stale, art gallery kind of place with white walls", saying that "the first shop I went in was scary, I like that: ***I don't think tattooing is for everyone*** and I like it when you walk into a place and everyone is kind but you get the feeling that you gotta' be on your best behavior or you're gonna' get kicked out!" (Tttism 2018, my emphasis).

The fact that this criticism targets practices and aesthetics that rupture the doxa of traditional tattooing indicates that there is an underlying concern with the loss of autonomy of the field — or heteronomy. Atkinson (2019, 88) explains that tensions within a field are "not just a case of the old versus the new, the less consecrated versus the more consecrated" because there is an active struggle between agents "to establish their capital as the 'real' or superior form of recognition". This is often manifested in the opposition between autonomy, when "agents are motivated purely by the specific forms of consecration and misrecognition developed within that field" (such as approval by other field members and internal awards), and heteronomy, when "agents are influenced by external demands and influences, by the values and imperatives of other fields" (ibid.).

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the attempt to preserve autonomy in tattooing is the persistence of conventions and its awards. DeMello (2000) writes in detail about how tattoo conventions are historically a place of exchange where the discourses of a traditional tattooing community are established and perpetuated. Aside from the traditional beauty pageant of tattooed women, a highlight of these events is the best-tattoo awards, which are usually strict in their categories: traditional, neotraditional, realism in colour and black-and-grey, and Oriental — sometimes leaving the broad category "avant garde" for other styles. As expected, men are often overrepresented as competitors and judges. But even in this realm, things are starting to change: large conventions like Golden State[30] and NY Empire State[31] Tattoo Expos in the USA and Rites of Passage[32] in Australia included "small tattoo" categories (less than 30 cm) in their awards from 2021.

On the other hand, heteronomy appears in different ways within the field of tattooing, with different impacts. Market influence can indeed lead to the reproduction of the same trendy designs that undermines creative authenticity or the erasure of the history and cultural significance of the practice. But at the same time, external social influences such as the recent #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have raised the visibility and voice of women and Black people in the industry, denouncing the oppressive power structures of the field (Garland 2020; Ruiz 2020). Therefore, the movement cannot be reduced to the downsides of commodification, although it is important to also be cautious about any overly romanticised idea of inclusion. This fuzziness is evidence of the complexity of this cultural shift and the need for a better understanding of its impact.

30 https://www.goldenstatetattooexpo.com

31 https://www.empirestatetattooexpo.com

32 https://ritesofpassagefestival.com

Women's strategies as feminist strategies

> *Not all feminist movement is so easily detected … A feminist movement might happen in the growing connections between those who recognize something — power relations, gender violence, gender as violence — as being what they are up against, even if they have different words for what that what is. If we think of the second-wave feminist motto "the personal is political," we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been bracketed as not political … Feminism is wherever feminism needs to be. Feminism needs to be everywhere.*
>
> *(Ahmed 2017, 3–4)*

In this analysis I outline how subversion strategies employed by women in the field include: increased representation; softening of hierarchies; promotion of friendly rather than intimidating experiences; cooperation rather than competition between artists; broadening of aesthetic possibilities; gendering and de-gendering of tattoo designs; and creation of safer spaces for other women. However, we cannot assume that actions performed by women necessarily equate to feminist actions. Therefore, in this section I engage with feminist literature to explore the ways these subversion strategies employed by women can also be understood as feminist strategies and how they are not only linked but contingent on each other. Nevertheless, such strategies are not free from contradiction and circumstances that might hinder women's progress in the field need to be acknowledged.

Feminism and representation

In political terms, Hannah Pitkin (1967) broadly defines representation as the act of making citizens' interests ***present*** in public policymaking but warns that the term can have different uses, which she identifies as formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation. Formalistic representation refers to the ***institutional arrangements*** that make representation possible — how a representative achieves that position and how they can be held accountable. Descriptive representation deals with the ways a representative ***resembles*** those represented in terms of interests and experiences. Symbolic representation involves what a representative ***means*** to those represented and the acceptance received from them — which can be achieved by manipulation, as is common in authoritarian governments. Finally, substantive representation refers to the ***actions*** taken by a representative to advance the interests of the represented.

While Pitkin defends a focus on substantive representation because it is the "acting for" instead of merely "standing for", feminist critics point out that descriptive representation is important because women are more likely to acknowledge and act towards women's interests than men are — although this is not guaranteed (Phillips 1995). Moreover, neither descriptive or substantive representation are necessarily positive in themselves since women are a heterogeneous group and might have conflicting positions, which makes diversity and intersectionality essential concerns (Celis 2013). Finally, from the perspective of everyday politics, representation does not have to be institutional or hierarchical: women can "stand for" and "act for" each other in everyday life in ways that are relevant for public debate. This includes, for example, grassroots movements (Kaplan 2016) and women's representation in the media (Rowley 2014). Thee are all important political perspectives because, as argued by Walby (2011), the potential for effective change lies in the combination of government and grassroots alliances engaging with the mainstream.

As stated by Bourdieu (1996), social fields are structurally homologous to the field of power, which means that the aforementioned concepts are transferable to the politics of specific fields. The feminist struggle for political representation can be seen, for example, in efforts to increase the representation of women in STEM. In such cases, representation can occur in terms of official leadership positions but also in the relationships with informal role models and peers. In this context, substantive representation works in combating sexist and discriminatory practices — from sexual harassment to disadvantageous working conditions for mothers — and descriptive representation works

in showing other women that this is a space they can and should occupy — an issue that is not separate from race, class, sexuality or ability (Yoder and Mattheis 2016; Kahn and Ginther 2017; McGee and Bentley 2017).

In traditional tattooing, the representation of women is restricted due to the reduced number of women taking part in it and the lack of diversity in terms of femininities. As previously stated, many women do not identify with the oversexualised, heteronormative albeit "aggressive" femininity of those who are legitimated by the subcultural gatekeepers and feel they do not work towards their interest in subverting gender norms. In contrast, the presence and prominence of more diverse types of tattooed femininities in contemporary movements allow women to feel not only acknowledged but relevant, which has a direct impact on the number of women who engage in tattooing. The consequent increased number of women in the field amplifies concerns that go beyond identity and unites them in their shared concerns — such as discrimination and sexual violence — and their mutual support better equips them to fight for a legitimation that does not rely on masculine orthodoxy.

Feminism and aesthetics

The two canons of Western tattooing, American traditional and Chicano styles, were developed *by* and *for* men and, as such, usually picture themes that are or were part of male lives and lifestyles. The imagery on American traditional flash sheets, for example, contains ships, anchors, flags and eagles, connected to sailors and military nationalism, as well as references to cowboys, drinking and gambling. As evident in classic designs such as "men's ruin",[33] women are often represented in an objectified and sexualised manner. Moreover, people who are not white cannot see their likeness in those images (Smith 2021). The Chicano style has the cultural specificity of the Los Angeles Latino community but, similarly, its imagery traditionally reflects the male realms of street life and prisons (Govenar 1988). Religious imagery is mixed with references to criminality, from guns to gang names, skulls and lowrider cars.

33 A classic tattoo design, usually reinterpreted by each tattooist, that pictures "a sexy, seductive pin-up girl, who is surrounded by all the vices that can ultimately lead to a 'man's ruin' … drinking glasses, bottles of alcohol, and all the usual signs of gambling — dice, cards, eight-balls, and horseshoes" (Aitken-Smith and Tyson 2016, 136).

Sexualisation of women is present in designs like the *payasa* and other representations of topless female figures.

It is not surprising that this type of imagery did not (and still does not) resonate with many women. Already excluded from the practice of tattooing, many women felt (and still feel) the traditionally masculine aesthetics of the work did not represent their lives, interests or self-images. For many middle-class individuals, this assessment is loaded with issues of stigma and the desire to remain separate from lower-class tastes (Irwin 2015). However, taste is also gendered, especially regarding something as embodied as tattoos, and the implications of having themes and styles that speak *from*, *to* and *about* women will inevitably converge with ideas of femininity.

Carolyn Korsmeyer (2004, 47) explains that, since the early theorising of aesthetics by the (male) philosophers of the Enlightenment, there was a "distinction between a 'feminine' taste for things that are pretty and charming, and a 'masculine' taste for art that is more profound and difficult". Such judgements are grounded in the traditional gender binarisms: man is the *mind*, rational and capable of disinterested appreciation, while woman is the *body*, sensuous and emotional; man is strong and virile, while woman is weak and fragile; man is concerned with serious matters, while woman is frivolous and vain. Within this patriarchal discourse, women are thought to lack the capacity to appreciate aesthetic complexity and so the objects and attributes of women's enjoyment are equally deemed inferior.

The feminine taste is also associated with the women's realm, namely, the home. Sparke (1995) argues that the domestic aesthetic emerged along with the middle class when industrialisation led to the separation of the public and private spheres in Western societies. While men dealt with work and politics in the public space, women stayed at home, in charge of creating a sanctuary for the family. In their pursuit of beauty, women carefully crafted textiles that granted rooms softness and comfort; they cared for an abundance of plants and flowers, seen as a healthy connection to nature in an increasingly urbanised environment; they acquired cheaply manufactured "knick-knacks", products of industrialisation, to decorate every possible surface of their rooms. Such style was emulated, within their possibilities, by working-class women and further consolidated as part of feminine culture.

Therefore, concepts that pertain to the feminine taste such as "pretty", "charming" and "cute" are often materialised in domestic objects and iconography.

Sianne Ngai (2012) discusses the political implications of "cute", a heavily gendered aesthetic term. Associated with the feminine and the infantile, cuteness aestheticises powerlessness. It relies on a sentimental response that positions the object as fragile and diminutive, implying inferiority. Cute things are also deemed simple and palatable, and therefore readily dismissed as superficial and easily consumable. Similarly, Rosalind Galt (2011) examines "pretty" as a low-status form of beauty associated with the ideas of frivolity and deception. Prettiness relates to the colourful, decorative and ornamental, which are attributes associated not only with the feminine but also with the "exotic" and therefore positioned as inferior in Western thought in terms of both gender and race.

Talking specifically about cinema, Galt provides several examples in which films that are recognisably nuanced or political are considered superficial and less meaningful due to the prettiness of the form. Likewise, tattoos that are pretty or cute — and therefore feminine — are seen as less capable of being disruptive or telling significant life stories. They are perceived as purely cosmetic. Unlike traditional tattoos, which are timeless and representative of a lifestyle, pretty tattoos are trendy and will eventually turn into a regretful memory of a fleeting moment when the woman judged herself bold and unique.

Acknowledging such historical and cultural implications of aesthetic judgements, a feminist stance on art, rather than completely rejecting or simplistically reinforcing gendered styles, positions women's multiple aesthetic interests as *relevant*. In the realm of fine arts, feminist artists have notably explored craft techniques, themes and materials such as florals and textiles as a way to call attention to women's overlooked creative production and domestic labour (Bryan-Wilson 2017). They have celebrated women's experiences such as motherhood (Liss 2009), drawn upon female stereotypes as a way to parody the arbitrary masculine values that dominate the field (Brand 2006) and played with myriad ways of reclaiming the female body from the male gaze (Nead 1992).

Tattoo designs produced by contemporary women artists today, many of them directly or indirectly informed by feminist art movements, are diverse on the spectrum of femininity. There are: designs that mimic cross-stitch patterns; designs that picture cute cartoon characters, nude goddesses and pregnant bodies; witchcraft references; feminist iconography and quotes; flower-framed vulvas; abstract lines and shapes. In any case, women bring their own tastes, personal histories and cultural references to create work that challenges the masculine canon of traditional tattooing even when reinterpreting traditional styles. For instance, beyond an aesthetic associated with femininities, the widespread stylistic variation driven by women creates a space in which indigenous women can revive tattooing practices of their ancestors that were almost erased by coloniality (Rupersburg 2017) and Black women can reinterpret the once-exclusionary flash imagery (Ferrara 2018) as well as exploring African iconography in claiming pride and visibility (Morrow 2019).

Such examples also highlight the aspects of this aesthetic exchange that go beyond the visual because, as stated by Peg Brand (2006, 167) "feminist art can provide aesthetic experiences even more pleasurable than standard (nonfeminist) art, once [the artist's biography] is learned". Clients can identify with an artist not only because the artwork resonates with their aesthetic sensibility but also because they might see their tastes being embodied in that person and might be struck by a familiarity with, or empathy for, their lived experience.

Feminist ethics of engagement

Despite all the divergences among the heterogenous feminist movements, they share a common understanding that women face oppression because of their social and biological identity, which has been framed as inferior by patriarchy. However, patriarchal culture is responsible for establishing and maintaining not only hierarchies of gender, but also hierarchies of race and of class (Boler 2004). Therefore, for many feminists fighting patriarchal structures also means challenging oppressive hierarchies in relationships beyond gender and engaging with others in ways that dismantle all of the structures that divide and oppress. This requires an ethical orientation that seeks to create more equal and supportive relationships with others and continuously confronts historically solidified oppressive forces (Ahmed 2017).

The first structures to be dissolved are the boundaries that divide who is allowed to participate or not in a certain space. Feminist scholars have discussed the many ways women are excluded from certain arenas by gatekeepers that perpetuate patriarchal values: laws and policies impeding women from exercising their reproductive autonomy (Nelson 2013b), ideals of biological determinism seeking to justify the sexual division of labour (Mies 2014) and language maintaining misogyny and racism through silencing and derogatory terms (Spender 1980) are just a few examples. These works show how boundaries are sustained or challenged not only through actions but also through attitudes. Subcultural rules, spoken and unspoken, strip women of their autonomy in choosing what type of work they want to do or acquire and by challenging those rules women create possibility. When women disconnect tattooing from gendered ideas of masculinised toughness and deviance, for both artists and clients, they make the practice more inclusive. By arguing against sexist language such as "tramp stamp"[34] and "skank flank"[35] women validate each other's choices and create a less judgemental environment.

Once entering male-dominated spaces, another structure to be broken is the hierarchy of knowledge. As discussed by Donna Haraway (1988), a masculinist approach to knowledge and practice privileges the idea of a rational, objective and detached expert whose opinion should be respected since they know what is "right" or "true". On the other hand, a feminist approach embraces subjectivity, diverse ways of knowing and the impossibility of a single "truth", and considers individuals to be experts about their own lives and bodies. Women working as tattoo artists make this distinction evident when they position themselves as accessible, attentive and open for negotiation, as opposed to a male tattooist who decides himself ***if*** and ***how*** a tattoo should be done. Working from a place of collaboration — which can only be achieved on a more level playing field, breaking with conventional expert hierarchies — artists make their practice feminist by making their clients' voices heard and supporting their bodily autonomy, while empowering their decisions with the artist's skilled knowledge.

Hierarchies are again broken when artists foster a culture of cooperation rather than competition. It was and is always in the interests of patriarchy to set women against each other as a way to keep them controlled under their own surveillance: "We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another" (hooks 2014). Usually these discourses are sustained by a logic of scarcity — from job positions to good husbands, there are only a small number of opportunities available to women, so they must fiercely compete for them. This culturally constructed rivalry is clear on reality TV shows like *Ink master*, in which clashes among men are framed in terms of artistry and dedication to the craft, while competition among the rare female participants is presented as catfights (Waller 2016). In traditional studios with a "one-woman policy" where women are hired for tokenism rather than talent (Morrow 2019), this culture is perpetuated.

Therefore, when artists invite other women into their studios or online networks, share experiences and encourage, promote or mentor each other, they are creating spaces of feminist resistance — some of which reinforce intersectional identities, providing a more inclusive space for Black (Ruiz 2020; Fernando 2021) and queer individuals (Leever 2019; Specter 2021). When women trust other women to tattoo their bodies, they make such spaces sustainable and independent from patriarchal sanctions. In this cycle of mutual support, the higher demand for female artists creates opportunities for women to pursue the artistic career, while in turn clients enjoy the increased possibilities of finding an artist they aesthetically and/or personally connect with.

Finally, the feminist ethics is evident in the care and respect for women's bodies and humanity. In an industry marked by abuse and harassment, women take a feminist stance not only by creating spaces that are safe from such behaviour but also by denouncing abuse, believing in each other's accounts, supporting each other in healing and boycotting offenders and holding them accountable when possible. However, as evident in the recent developments of the #MeToo movement (and in feminist history in general), such actions often result in patriarchal backlash.

34 Slang for a tattoo on the lower back of a woman.

35 Slang for a tattoo on the ribs of a woman.

The risks in subversion

Feminist action is often met with external resistance but also with intrinsic contradictions. While this analysis highlights the positive impact of subversion based on movements that are already taking place, it is important to consider to what extent these strategies can actually fulfil their potential and whether, along with cultural change, they risk creating new circumstances that can be unfavourable to women if left unexamined. Few would argue against the benefits of the sense of collectivity and mutual support that has emerged in the relationships among women in the field. This seems like a step towards the solidarity that so many feminists argue for — women "united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression" (hooks 2014, 67). However, solidarity has proven to be a challenging concept to consolidate in practice,

firstly because of persisting inequalities. Despite clear advancements for women in tattooing, there is much to be done to ensure opportunities are equitable for a diversity of women. It is expected that middle- and upper-class women will have more resources available to pursue training, buy quality equipment and open their own studios, for example, creating their own safe space from the start. Moreover, once in this situation, they might tend to professionally favour similarly positioned women who are already part of their social circle. Just as the marginalised men of tattoo subculture reproduced the unequal dynamics of the field of power, women must be careful not to sustain imbalances within their own domain. Given the widespread postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that position a woman's individual success as equivalent to female liberation (McRobbie 2009), we should be wary of narratives of acomplishment being manipulated to obscure the need for further action.

Such imbalances can lead to another obstacle: fragmentation within the movement. Along with women-led spaces, there is an emergence of artists and studios that position themselves as focused on Black or queer communities, for example. As argued by Thompson (2015), white and middle-class women have more freedom to experiment with tattoos, while women of colour and queer women face more resistance due to their already marginalised identities. Therefore, these safe spaces are important in terms of representation and identification that goes beyond empathy, but there is a risk of such actions remaining insular and on the margins. Such fragmentation might not only weaken the broader movement for change, but also risk normalising tattooing in a normative way — meaning tattoos and tattooing become acceptable for ***certain*** women while leaving other, traditionally marginalised voices once again out of the dominant discourse.

In addition, the relationships between artists and clients cannot be romanticised. Tattooing still exists within a capitalist context: it is an economic exchange, a professional service that requires more than creative labour. It requires what Arlie Hochschild's ([1983] 2012, 106) defines as emotional labour, the "management of feelings", or how workers suppress, display or enact emotions through facial and bodily display in order to induce emotions in customers. While all jobs place some sort of burden on the worker's feelings, emotional labour specifically occurs "in jobs that require personal contact with the public, the production of a state of mind in others" — which is precisely what the creation of a safe and welcoming environment in tattoo studios requires.

Feminist scholars are critical of emotional labour because it often exploits the stereotypical role of women as sensitive, emotionally expressive individuals who prioritise the wellbeing of others. This makes it, like housekeeping and family care, a form of "shadow labor": hidden and undervalued (Hochschild 2012, 113). As a consequence, the weight this type of work places on women is underestimated and they are perceived negatively when they do not perform it, whereas men are usually not required to perform the same work: for them being polite is enough, while women are expected to go further and be "seriously nice". Another problematic aspect of emotional labour is that it is often presented to women as the best they have to offer, as opposed to men, who are valued for their expertise and authority. Some evidence of this widespread bias can be found in AI-powered chatbots that are often portrayed as women for customer service and sales, while a male configuration is prefered for technical advice (Feine et al. 2019; McDonnell and Baxter 2019). These gendered expectations reside not only in the customer's mind: for female service workers, the quality of the interaction and service processes are determinant of their understanding of good customer service, while their male counterparts believe that good customer service is mainly the result of efficient problem-solving (Mathies and Burford 2011).

Studies have investigated the impact of this type of work in the beauty (Toerien and Kitzinger 2007; Kang 2010; Hanson 2019) and fitness (Maguire 2001; George 2008) industries, which are similar to tattooing since they involve intimate contact and body work. Findings suggest that there are positive outcomes, such as client retention and word-of-mouth promotion, a sense of autonomy and genuine friendships. However, the labour can also make workers feel burdened by their clients' emotional demands, leading to emotional detachment and cynicism in the long term. The pressure can be amplified for workers who are supervised instead of self-managed. In the context of tattooing, women can convert their emotional labour into valuable social and symbolic capital which they would lack in the subculture. However, they might be subject to emotional demands and have their skills obscured by service work. Such analysis is complex because tattooing fits what Molly George (2008, 115) defines as "expert service work", in which "most interactions are unpredictable, the service is partly intangible, and workers are largely self-supervised, making routinization of the consumer exchange or workers' behaviors impossible".

Finally, another concern is the appropriation of tattoos and tattooing by businesses that exploit narratives of feminism and womanhood for profit. Tattoos marketed as female empowerment can be, just like feminist slogan T-shirts, another item to be consumed as a form of performative "commodity activism" that ignores further practical action (Repo 2020). In another example, tattoos can be marketed as part of mystical rituals of female healing and empowerment (McLintock 2021), similar to contradictory practices in the wellness industry that use the "sacred feminine" to promote routines of, and products for, self-care and self-improvement (Longman 2018). Even though, for many women, tattoos can be a significant part of a personally healing journey (Davidson 2016), tattoos are not therapeutic in themselves and the seemingly harmless (but often expensive) rituals can be problematic. While the discourse can be used to bring women together in affirmative ways, it can also be part of a postfeminist and neoliberal logic that reinforces gender essentialism, confines the feminist struggle to the individual and locates the solution to social problems in the consumption of goods and experiences. Moreover, the practices are subject to criticism regarding cultural appropriation when there is a superficial engagement with ritualistic tattoos that are traditional to certain cultures.

In sum, the strategies adopted by women to consolidate their presence in the field of tattooing have their parallels with feminist theory and praxis, and it is important to acknowledge the potential of these movements without ignoring their intrinsic contradictions. I highlight how these strategies are mediated by aesthetics and interpersonal relationships and, in this sense, the tattoo shop should be seen as a strategic locale: it is a designed space where individuals engage sensorially and affectively with their surroundings, with each other and with tattoo culture more broadly. It is a place where the process of production/consumption of tattoos takes place and where the different positions within tattoo culture are made evident. I argue that an investigation of these spaces could provide a better understanding of the ways individuals engage with the cultural shift and how that relates to gender. The next chapter will explore, by means of a case study, the nuances of such engagements

Chapter 4

Case Study

The atmosphere of a boutique tattoo studio

This case study is based on 15 formal interviews and dozens of casual conversations, observations and social media interactions that took place between 2020 and 2021, when permitted by COVID-19 restrictions. Throughout the chapter, I report and analyse the accounts of six tattoo artists — Amanda, Eryka, Jennifer, Mali, Matthew and Ryan — and nine clients — Alisha, Bianca, Jacob, Jacqueline, John, Laura, Megan, Tabatha and Wayne — about their experiences with tattooing in general and with this studio specifically. Although my investigation is focused on gender, I did not ask direct questions about the topic, in order to observe *if* and *how* it would emerge spontaneously. I highlight that this is not a female-owned or all-female studio, and the studio does not position itself as a feminist space. It does, however, have a majority of female clients.

Drawing on a sensory ethnographic approach (Pink 2015), I examine how the affective atmosphere of a contemporary tattoo studio emerges within a specific spatial configuration that is informed by gender, class and taste, and I discuss the implications and possibilities that arise from this relationship. Human interactions between tattoo artists and clients are a meaningful and complex part of the aesthetic experience of giving and receiving a tattoo and such engagements are mediated by space and materiality — therefore the atmospheric framework is useful for encompassing such multiplicity. I do not limit the atmosphere of the studio to the aesthetic elements of the space or focus on the semiotic meanings of these elements. Following Böhme (2016), I look away from the objects' expressions, such as form and functionality, to concentrate on the impressions they make and how they contribute to the embodied experience. Therefore, any symbolic implication is contextualised and I stress that the ways individuals perceive and make sense of sensory inputs is ultimately subjective.

The case study is a foundation for the two following chapters, in which the relationships between the studio experience and the theoretical framework are explored in greater detail.

Overview

The object of this case study is a contemporary tattoo studio in Melbourne that has operated since 2017 and currently has 13 artists on its roster. It is located in an inner suburb on a busy commercial street. The shop front is quite sober — the full glass windows and door have black frames and are mostly coated with an etched texture for privacy. There is one hanging sign with the studio name and a small white sticker on the door with the studio logo and operating hours. Inside, the open-plan space is minimal in decor, but usually full of people. The waiting area is small, with a wooden bench and black pillows. Right in front of it, there is a wall made from light wood with potted plants and a white neon sign that says "it was all a dream" in cursive writing — a corner that clients constantly photograph and share on social media. Past the reception desk, a light-grey textured wall marks the common work area, which comprises a full body mirror, a printer and transfer equipment. The rest of the walls are white, with a few pieces of artwork — some skateboards painted by one of the tattoo artists and colourful contemporary portraits of famous hip hop musicians painted by a local fine artist. On the right-hand side, the wall is fully mirrored with a wooden counter — much like a beauty salon — under which the workstations are set up (Figure 4.1).

A typical workstation at the studio consists of a foldable massage table, a garbage bin and a metal trolley with drawers in which the artists keep their equipment and materials. The table is covered in black synthetic leather and has wood-finish legs that can be adjusted for height. When set up, the top of the trolley is covered with cling wrap. A smudge of vaseline helps hold small plastic cups full of ink in place. Sitting on top of the trolley there is a plastic bottle containing the cleaning solution and a small power supply, which can also be attached magnetically to the side. The tattoo machine connects to the power source with a cord. Some artists choose to use a pedal on the ground that can be wireless or directly connected to the power supply as well. Everything is wrapped in plastic and the cover is replaced after every client. A pile of paper towel sheets is either on the trolley or nearby. All the other equipment — such as gloves, ink, needles, etc. — is kept inside the drawers or in the common storage areas.

The process

The process starts with the client's very decision to get a tattoo, which is usually followed by settling on a concept (which can be either general or very specific) and discussing this idea with family and

Figure 4.1. Overview of the studio space. Photograph by author.

friends. Once confident in their decision, clients will move on to research, looking for visual references and the studio or artist that best suits their expectations. They often already have a few options in mind, because of either friends' recommendations or familiarity with certain artists' work on social media. At this point the idea is likely more refined and the customer can contact one or multiple artists/studios to enquire about prices and availability.

At this studio, each artist handles their own appointments, so the studio will forward customer requests to them. If clients do not specify an artist, the studio will recommend someone suited for the style. Most artists communicate with their clients via email or Instagram and some hire other people to manage their bookings. Clients can book a free 30-minute consultation appointment to discuss their ideas in person if they prefer, but they usually do so via email. Once customers and artists agree on a date, the client leaves a deposit and the appointment is officially booked, often two or more months ahead due to the studio's high demand. Appointments can be rebooked if needed, but that would mean another period of wait. Walk-ins are also rare due to limited availability.

On the day of the appointment, customers arrive at the studio and check in with the receptionist. They sit in the waiting area until the artist is ready. When they are called in, they sit at the artist's workstation to have an introductory talk and discuss the design. Usually artists already have the design ready on their iPads and just make small adjustments. They then print samples to pick a size and make the stencil to try it in the desired placement, adding freehand elements with a marker if needed. Once the customer checks this in the mirror and is satisfied, the artist quickly sets up the machine and ink cups at the workstation.

The tattooing process can last a few minutes or several hours depending on the size and complexity of the design. Larger pieces can be done in multiple sessions. At this point, the customer lies down on the table, adjusting their position according to the area to be tattooed. Some people like to chat with the artist, others listen to music or scroll their phones to distract themselves and some just close their eyes and try to relax. If it is a longer session or the tattoo is located in a painful area, customers might want to take quick breaks.

After the tattoo is finished, the artist follows the customer to the mirror so they can see the final result. Both take pictures of the finished tattoo. The artist then covers the tattoo with a medical dressing and instructs the client about aftercare, even though the information is also available on the studio website and via a QR code placed at the front of the studio. The customer then pays for the tattoo — some artists prefer cash, but most accept mobile bank transfers and card payments.

Both customers and artists often share pictures of the new tattoo on social media. The healing process of the tattoo will take about two weeks until it finishes peeling and scabbing. In the meantime, customers are instructed to keep the area clean and protected and to moisturise with aftercare balm several times a day. If the tattoo needs a touch-up after healing, customers will book another short (and free) appointment. After the whole process, the customer becomes a tattooed person and can display their tattoo (or not) as desired. They can eventually decide on a new piece, restarting the process.

Figure 4.2 summarises the flow of actions involved in tattooing. The experience described is overall positive and while this is not necessarily the case for all customers, it represents the majority of interactions observed at the studio. As a concise diagram, it does not account for the nuances of the process, but is an accessible way to describe the tattooing experience for people who might not be familiar with it. The following sections further dissect the experiences of both artists and clients, considering not only the encounter in the studio but also the social media interactions that happen before and after the event.

Before the appointment: the social media experience

As previously argued, social media plays an important role in contemporary tattoo culture and for this studio Instagram is a particularly relevant space. The studio has over 170,000 followers on the platform and high engagement in likes, comments and story responses. The feed content primarily features a selection of pictures of the tattoos done at the studio by the different artists, but also local celebrity clients and events in partnership with brands. At the top of the page, each artist has a dedicated "story highlight" introducing themselves and their work. For most clients, this is the first contact they have with the studio and it is already part of the experience.

Megan got her previous tattoo in a studio closer to where she lives, with no prior research: "I asked for fine lines and they said 'you can't really do that, it doesn't really work that way'. Then a couple years later I stumbled upon you guys and I was like 'damn, I wish I would have waited!'". Her frustration is understandable: she realised that her initial request was in fact possible but she now has a tattoo she dislikes because someone else — a man who was in a position of power as the specialist — invalidated her choice. For this one, she thoroughly researched her artist's portfolio on Instagram and says that it made a difference: "at least you have a better idea on what the artist's style is … you sort of get to know people who have similar tastes to you". Alisha also highlights social media as part of the reason she sees this studio as different from the other ones she has been to — "the quality of the artists, the quality on Instagram … I feel like a lot of the stuff is stuff that I can see myself getting".

Such quality and consistency is intentional. The artists specialise in different tattoo styles and post pictures of their work under their own accounts. However, the studio's Instagram is carefully curated to ensure that the selection of images presented there — usually small and fine-line pieces, all edited with the same filter — are coherent with its reputation and appealing to its target audience. Moreover, its social media presence is not limited to the portfolio. As Alisha continues: "when you have the stories with the questions, I really like how interactive it is." At first glance, such interactions position the studio as accessible and willing to connect with its audience. Encouraging engagement is also a strategy to remain among the first content shown on the followers' feed and stories tab and to recommend the studio to others (Bellavista et al. 2019). Such strategies sustain the high number of followers that validates the studio as popular and trendy.

At the same time, Instagram fame can signal inaccessibility. Because the studio is so popular and most artists are in high demand, clients usually have to wait a few months for an appointment. Although this is not an intentional element of the business model — there is a physical limit on how many tattoos an artist is able to do in a day — this scarcity increases the desirability and perceived value of the work, an effect that is explored in luxury markets (Ko et al. 2019). Other attributes of luxury such as exclusivity (there is no flash sheet to choose from) and artistry (as proposed by Kosut 2014) are also expected by customers. As a result, receiving a tattoo at this studio can also become a matter of status, making it a highly aestheticised experience from the beginning. For instance, Jacob says that when he mentioned to his co-workers he was getting a tattoo at this studio, they were surprised by its popularity on social media and assumed it was going to be very expensive.

Other factors might play into the decision on this studio. Tabatha, for example, says that one thing that caught her attention is the fact that "it has several female artists, which is unfortunately unusual in the industry". Many clients said that they prefer or even exclusively choose female tattoo artists. Some of them, like Bianca, take an openly feminist stance and state it is a way to support and empower other women. Others, like Jacqueline, say: "it's not even about being a radical feminist, it's really because it's a better experience". In her opinion, "female artists are more inclined to be perfectionists and I prefer that". She also mentions "the openness to listening and humility" as attributes of female artists, stating that "artists need to be humble and accept suggestions and adjustments" and, from her previous experiences, male tattooists are less likely to do that: when she got her first tattoo "the guy basically imposed the size and final design, I didn't have a lot of say in the matter".

Just like Megan's, her comment reinforces how the idea of the tattooist as authority is pervasive in tattoo subcultures. This often gendered conception reflects not only the male gaze (what designs, placements and sizes are considered "appropriate" for women) but also the cultural gatekeeping of the traditionally male-dominated industry. However, there is a change in behaviour that is in part led by social media — as stated by Ryan: "now everyone thinks they're an expert because they're so exposed to it. There's this huge exposure to tattoos but there's no more education … so people think they know more than they actually do, whereas back then it was more like 'I'm telling you how it should be' and they would listen".

There is a point to be made about TV shows and social media giving clients inaccurate or unrealistic expectations about tattoos and tattooing. However, technical issues aside, the understanding of what

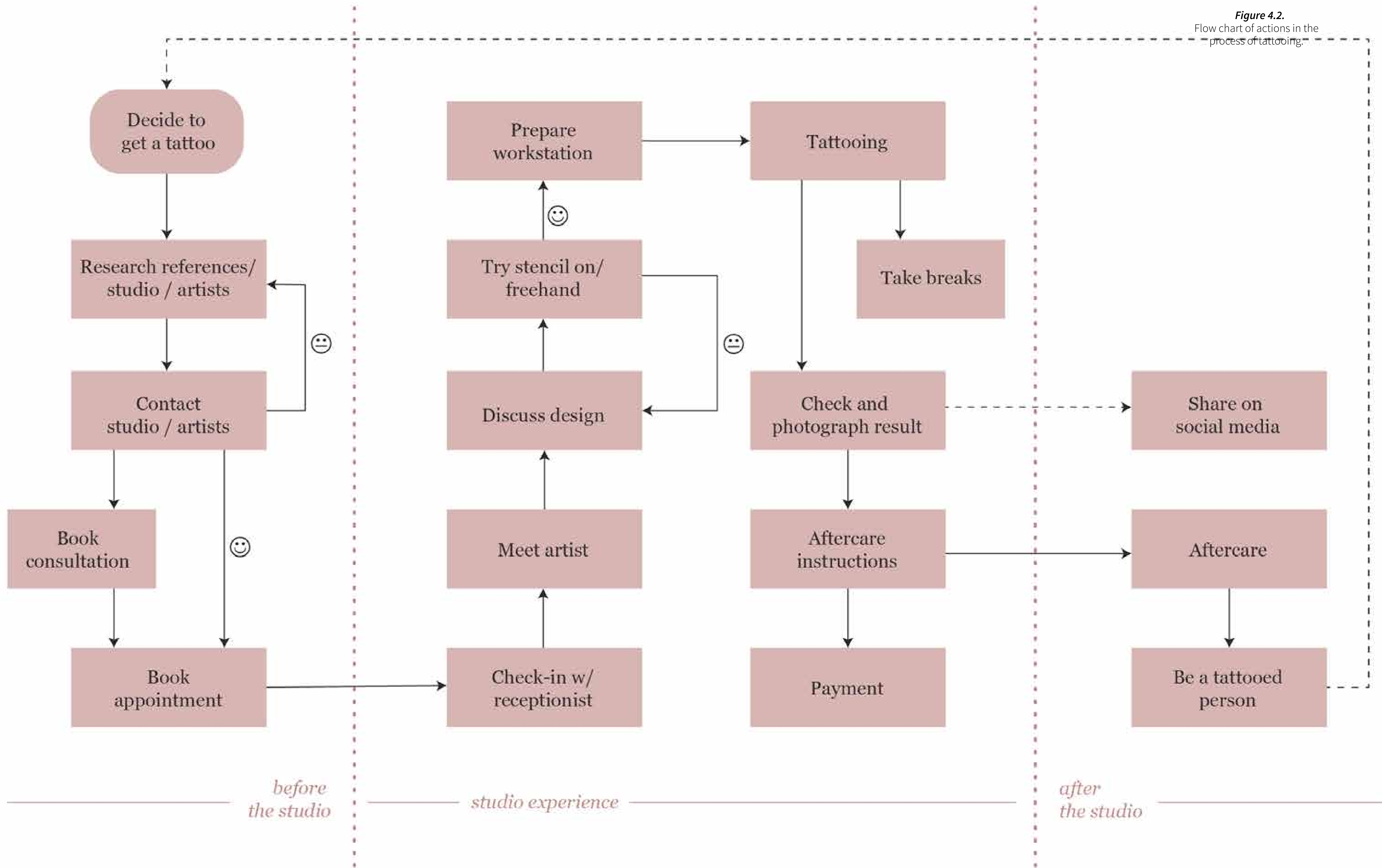

Figure 4.2.
Flow chart of actions in the process of tattooing.

configures a "good" or "bad" tattoo is very subjective and clients should have autonomy over the decision to alter their bodies. Tattooing should be seen as a negotiation between the artist — the professional expert — and client — the expert on their own body and self-expression. Many clients, like Jacqueline, find it easier to have this negotiation with female tattoo artists, whom they perceive as gentler, more polite and less judgemental, consistent with a feminist ethics of engagement. Moreover, considering that taste is also gendered, the aesthetic expectations of female artists and clients who share similar habitus are more likely to intersect, facilitating that creative negotiation.

The studio experience

First impressions: feeling welcomed

The journey inside the studio starts at the reception desk, where the clients check in with the receptionist. Some customers highlight the impact of this welcoming stage and describe it as different from their experience in other shops. Laura, for example, says: "the first studio I went to, it took a while before someone said 'hi', and it was more of a masculine environment". Her description of the unwelcoming environment as "masculine" implies a gendered atmosphere that made her feel out of place, likely due to the absence of people who looked like her and reflected her aesthetic interests. At the second studio she visited, she interacted with a female artist but still described it as an unwelcoming experience: "I had to sit there for a long wait to speak with one of the girls". This contrasts with her description of this current studio: "[here] you're not just standing for like five minutes, there's always someone who says 'hey, who are you seeing?' ... which I think it's really important, coming into a tattoo environment, especially if it's your first tattoo and especially if you're a female … It's quite an experience". Even though Bianca was already an experienced tattooee when she first came to this studio, she reinforces this point: "it was a completely different experience. When you arrive there's music playing, someone in the reception waiting for you". For both of them, being acknowledged and cared for made a difference in how they perceived being included in that space.

This reinforces the idea that the act of ***welcoming*** is an important part of the experience and might influence how clients perceive what happens after that. Researchers in hospitality have long discussed how welcoming attitudes contribute significantly to guest satisfaction (Ariffin 2013) and loyalty (Barsky and Nash 2002) and might even affect their sensory experience (Lv et al. 2021). From a feminist perspective, an experience that is designed with the intention of making individuals feel that they can occupy a space can be empowering, making them comfortable and confident to proceed.

However, this did not seem to be a concern in the other shops mentioned by Laura. The reason might lie in the intention to nurture a different type of atmosphere in traditional parlours associated with a stereotypical toughness that is expected from the subculture. Even though most clients who had visited traditional parlours had no complaints about the artists themselves and described them as polite and professional, the word ***intimidating*** was often used when describing the overall experience, many times connecting the discomfort with the aesthetic components of the studio. Ryan acknowledges this when sharing stories of the beginning of his career over ten years ago:

> *Shops back then were trying to put out that hard image, very old school. Everyone was lovely but people were more intimidated when coming to a tattoo studio back then, whereas now it's more boutique-y and a salon sort of vibe. Back then it was not like that, it was dark, blacks and reds all over the wall and flash everywhere — compared to the new ones now with all the mirrors and clean white walls — back then you couldn't see the wall, it was flash everywhere.*

Ryan's description shows how design interventions influence clients' perceptions: he associates the "hard image" with darkness, intense colours and the "old school'' tattoo imagery. This suggests that the interpersonal exchanges are entangled with the environments they take place in. Ryan says that "most people coming in would feel intimidated but we were all art nerds. Nothing changed as far as that goes, it just looked harder because people were covered in tattoos, really. But personality-wise they were big softies". As someone whose habitus and social capital allowed him to comfortably circulate among tattoo artists even before becoming one himself, this "soft" side was more readily available to him. Moreover, his cultural capital enabled him to identify with and appreciate the aesthetic of those shops. However, for clients like Laura, an "outsider" with no previous knowledge or experience of the subculture, it can be harder to overcome first impressions. Shops that are designed by and for men perpetuate a gendered aesthetic that not only ignores women's interests, but acts as a constant reminder of their historical exclusion from those spaces.

Light, colour and imagery: a sense of familiarity

Jennifer provides a depiction of a former workplace that "had no natural light, they covered all windows with pictures, it was really depressing and dark and cluttered". Indeed, many clients often mention the light colours and brightness of this studio as determinant of how they feel welcomed to the space. Bianca recalls an experience in another tattoo shop, saying, "I had the feeling that it was a clean environment, but at the same time it was dark, it wasn't very ***welcoming***". Even though Wayne never got a tattoo in a traditional parlour, he has a similar opinion: "I don't think I would like a studio that was like that stereotype, dark, all dudes sitting in chairs … I'm not saying I'm uncomfortable around there, but this is a ***welcoming*** studio, it's pretty nice and well lit, definitely a positive". Jacob uses the same vocabulary: "It's quite ***welcoming***, mostly because of the light, I suppose".

Aside from its symbolic connections with religious morality and technological progress, light can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the context. A lack of lighting can make people feel threatened or disoriented in a new location, while low lights in restaurants and domestic settings might be appreciated as cosy and private (Bille and Sørensen 2007). Considering the traditional association between tattoos and deviant behaviour and mysterious subcultures, darkness assumes a negative connotation. In this context, light can increase the sense of safety because everything can be easily seen, leaving no room for the unexpected, unfamiliar or obscure. Once more, considering female clients who are not familiar with the culture or even female artists who might have had unpleasant previous experiences in tattoo parlours, this can create a greater sense of safety and control over the situation.

In tattoo studios, the brightness can also increase the sense of health safety since it is often associated with cleanliness. Bianca says her first impression of the studio was that "the environment was extremely clean and bright". Laura adds: "It's very clean, like white clean. Like a canvas". Although the mentioned cleanliness also refers to the minimalist design, this issue is not separate from hygiene. Studies suggest that uncluttered environments are perceived as more visually pleasing and clean (Vos et al. 2019) and that lighting, shiny and white surfaces, plants and ambient scents are factors that influence the perceived cleanliness in hospitality settings (Magnini and Zehrer 2021).

The usual dark colours and clutter of traditional parlours can be perceived as a lack of care for the space and, consequently, for the people who occupy it. Jennifer recalls a "messy" previous workplace: "everything was everywhere, lots of dust … it was just bad". This opinion is shared by Bianca in referring to traditional parlours that she considers "visually heavy" and "too busy, with too many tattoo designs hanging on the wall … looks like it will accumulate dirt over time".

The perception of being safe and welcomed can also be connected to the sense of ***familiarity*** afforded by the design interventions. As mentioned by Martin (2019), the contemporary tattoo studio looks like other types of businesses that customers go into frequently in gentrified neighbourhoods, such as galleries and cafes. The layout of the workstations in front of the fully mirrored counter is similar to that of a beauty salon. The indoor plants give the impression of an environment that is both homely and cared for, as opposed to the studios described above by Jennifer and Bianca. This also works in the opposite way: a lack of familiarity with tattoo subculture can contribute to an intimidating atmosphere in traditional parlours that are loaded with tattoo imagery. As explained by Matthew, "old tattoo studios can be a bit intimidating just for the fact that it's generally a male-driven profession and you are getting tattooed by people who are heavily tattooed and have obviously been around and know the industry pretty well, and you feel you're trying to get into that. It's a bit nerve-wracking". His comment highlights the gendered nature of gatekeeping in tattooing and the pressure on newcomers to fit within the traditional industry standards established by the "heavily tattooed men". In contrast, he says that this is "the most 'not-tattoo-studio' I've ever seen and that works in its favour". Tabatha agrees: "it's not what you would expect from a tattoo studio and that's why I think it's so inviting". Jacob recognises a certain intentionality in the studio design as well: "I don't know if you'd see it and think 'that's a tattoo

studio'. And I don't know if you *want* people to know that's a tattoo studio … maybe that's the idea of it".

This exemplifies how the design interventions that promote a more inclusive atmosphere are not limited to the presence of certain elements, but also involve the absence of others. Looking again at the traditional parlour, the "hard image" stated by Ryan translates, among other things, into specific types of colours and imagery — such as skulls and macabre references, allusions to violence and criminality, sexualised women — that can be immediately confronting for a mainstream audience. Eryka remembers that another studio she worked at had "a samurai armour, and skulls and *hannya*[36] all over the wall, it was really creepy in the evenings". Jacob recalls walking past tattoo parlours that had "big photos of whole-body tattoos, with dragons and skulls, or American traditional things like a heart with a banner, or a revolver", and adds: "I find it a little bit scary if you have that on your window". In Tabatha's words, it is "the kind of place that your grandmother would be shocked to go to!"

Even though Matthew appreciates traditional tattooing, he acknowledges that "every other studio has got the old flash mortar wall and that can sort of [pause] there's still a bit of stigma with tattooing, but I guess a lot of people that come in here are more at ease because it's not your typical tattoo studio, there's a different experience". His comment implies that aesthetic cues such as the flash wall signal a certain type of experience that is still associated with stigma. Following Bourdieu's distinction rationale (1984), by eliminating such cues the studio distances itself from the stigma they carry and clients feel "at ease" because, by associating themselves with this studio instead of the "typical" parlour, they will also be dissociated from the lower-class and deviant subculture stigma.

Moreover, by adding aesthetic elements associated with legitimised taste, the studio further strengthens its distinct position. The aesthetic experience in this studio, as representative of the Boutique Studio described in Chapter 1, is aligned with a trendy and "Instagrammable" taste regime. Bianca even says that "if Ikea built a tattoo studio in their showroom, it would look like this". Therefore, as a carefully curated space that follows aesthetic trends, the studio has a sense of luxury that dissociates it from the lower-class stigma and further validates the work performed there as "tasteful".

Intentionally or not, such interventions also distance the studio from the hypermasculinity of traditional parlours, inducing an atmosphere that is less intimidating for individuals who do not feel included by that gendered aesthetic. As pointed out in Chapter 1, a Boutique Studio does not necessarily have a stereotypically feminine aesthetic. However, as many artists and clients here describe, such studios do feel opposite to the traditional parlour in terms of creating a safer and more welcoming atmosphere that is aligned with feminist values.

Smell and touch: safe and pleasing

After the client moves towards the workstations to meet the artist, other senses are in action. Once set on the design and size, rubbing alcohol is used to disinfect the area to be tattooed and antibacterial soap is used to clean and transfer the tattoo design stencil onto the skin. At this point, the connection between the smell of disinfectants and cleanliness is often brought up by clients, saying it "smells like a hospital". One of the first things Laura mentions about her previous visit to another tattoo parlour is that "[it] smelled like stale smoke, that sort of put me off a bit". This contrasts with her description of this studio: "when I came here, it just smelled good … You smell sort of the inks but also the sanitisers, it's a clean smell". Smells like disinfectants are often associated with a healthy environment, a perception that is further reinforced by the absence of smells that are considered unpleasant or associated with a lack of hygiene (Stenslund 2015; Xiao et al. 2018). This adds to the previously discussed sense of *safety* — a studio that is perceived as being as clean as a hospital is not considered a health hazard, unlike the stigmatised studios from the mid-20th century.

Familiarity again plays a role when it comes to smells, given they can both activate our cognitive ability to recognise odours and powerfully evoke particular life memories (Herz 2011). During the tattoo procedure, artists use either a solution of "green soap" or a specific tattoo cleansing foam that often seems to catch the client's attention, receiving comments like "smells so nice" and "reminds me of this shampoo". The smell is not only considered pleasant but is also a reminder of the beauty products that are part of the everyday routines of personal maintenance. Such associations can contribute to a sense of physical and emotional comfort derived from the idea of care.

Those products are also associated with pleasant tactile sensations: clients mention the soothing quality of the cleansing and the feeling of cooling down the area that has been flared up by the needle. Aside from that, pain was surprisingly not a topic of interest for most interviewees. The most common responses from clients when prompted were: "it's fine" or "it's not as bad as I expected/remembered". Even though the artists have anecdotes about particularly sensitive customers, they say those do not account for the majority of their clientele. Pain is an extremely complex and subjective phenomenon with physical and psychological components, and within health sciences there is no consensus on the factors that influence pain perception and management, especially considering how contextual the investigation is (Edwards et al. 2005). Therefore, I do not suggest that the studio's atmosphere can change how people *feel* pain, but I do consider how it could influence the ways people *engage* with their bodily sensations.

Traditional parlours foster a culture in which tattoos are seen as symbols of toughness and resistance, usually associated with masculinity. From shop names such as "house of pain" to pieces of decor like the "tattoo removal" saw, these spaces are designed to reinforce the idea that getting a tattoo is supposed to be an unpleasant experience, signalling that it is not for everyone. This is a quite different position from traditionally female beauty spaces, in which painful procedures such as waxing, microneedling and permanent makeup are normalised. Those spaces are designed to minimise physical discomfort by creating a sensorially pleasant experience otherwise and by framing the procedures in terms of care. While the tattooist is there to challenge you, the beautician is there to pamper you. At this studio, the attention to the sensory experience and the friendly attitude of the artists create an atmosphere in which pain seems to fade into the background. Such a position challenges traditional understandings of tattoos as "earned" symbols of endurance to pain and, consequently, who feels entitled to carry them.

Sounds: comfort and "the right feel"

Sounds seem to play a significant role in the experiences of both artists and clients. While depictions of traditional tattoo parlours often report heavy metal as the background music and the distinct loud buzz of traditional coil machines, this studio goes in a very different direction. Pop, hip hop or R&B are usually playing in the background — with a preference for artists that are trending at the moment. The soundscape also includes some chatter and laughter among artists, between artists and clients, and among clients themselves since many times friends come together to get matching tattoos or just offer support for first-time tattooees. One sound that is absent is the traditional tattoo machine noise — all artists here use state-of-the-art rotary machines that have very quiet engines.

Eryka says that clients prefer the quiet machines because it makes the procedure feel "less scary". It is indeed common to hear clients expressing their surprise at the lack of noise compared to their previous experiences and even saying that the quiet buzz is "*relaxing*". Literature in dentistry correlates the characteristic drill noise with increased pain perception and anxiety (Yamada et al. 2006; Wong et al. 2011) due to the stressful nature of the sound frequency and the triggering of negative memories or anticipation of pain. Such associations can be extrapolated to the context of tattooing — not only can the loud noise be uncomfortable, but the coil machine sound is often associated with parlours or TV shows that depict tattoo culture as intimidating (also evidenced by the use of the term "tattoo gun") and the procedure as painful.

Regarding the social noise, not everyone enjoys the busyness. Matthew, for example, finds it hard to focus on his work when a lot of people are coming and going. And one client, Tabatha, says she prefers to book her appointments on Sundays because the studio is quieter and more private, making it easier for her to *relax*. However, some people perceive the chatter in a positive way: Alisha says that the studio "has a chilled out vibe. The music and getting the right feel. You guys seem very comfortable with each other … it doesn't have a negative vibe". When I asked her about other shops' "vibes" she said it was "not negative, but it didn't have the chitter-chatter between artists, they were just doing their own thing. Whereas here it feels like you guys got banter, joking around, I like that … It feels more *relaxing*". Alisha's statement highlights how personal

36 Traditional Japanese Noh theatre mask that represents a jealous female demon.

interactions outside of the client–artist exchange can also influence the overall experience. Matthew says that in less popular shops there is sometimes a feeling that artists are "waiting at the door to jump on anyone that comes in" and have to "fight a friend and colleague for work". This uncomfortable dynamic is sometimes clear to customers and reinforces the idea that the culture around tattooing is one of hostility. In that sense, the higher demand created by the expansion of tattooing into the mainstream not only enables more people to participate in it but also allows them to engage with each other more respectfully — both related to the presence of women in the field, as argued in Chapter 3.

As mentioned by Alisha, music can also help build "the right feel", although for most people this is quite hard to define. According to Laura, "other places have really loud music and it's not that I mind that, but this speaks to me better, if you know what I mean … this atmosphere". Jennifer considers herself a quite eclectic person, but when it comes to the ideal soundtrack for a tattoo studio, she says "nothing too 'screamo', I hate that. Anything but that!". Even Matthew, who enjoys heavy metal and hardcore music himself, acknowledges that "the music I listen to is not necessarily a ***calming*** experience for everyone", so he says that even though it is hard to please everybody, it is important to find a "happy medium".

Music genres common in traditional parlours, such as heavy metal and hardcore, are associated with male-dominated subcultures (Driver 2016; Hill 2016), which contributes to both the hypermasculinity and the specificity of subcultural capital that make some people feel excluded from those spaces for not sharing those aesthetic interests. Usually at a high volume, the soundtrack can be hard to ignore and create an obstacle to conversation, reinforcing the perception of inaccessibility of some practitioners and the feeling of intimidation. Here, in contrast, the soundscape is similar to those of cafes and environments where social interactions are encouraged. Drawing from more mainstream playlists, the music genres are familiar to a broader audience and can be more or less gendered depending on which tattoo artist hits Play first.

If from a physiological perspective excessive noise and loudness can cause discomfort and annoyance (Basner et al. 2014), from a cognitive perspective, more importantly, loud noise and heavy music would be inconsistent with the atmosphere evoked by the other aesthetic stimuli around this studio. Researchers argue that sensory cues are perceived holistically rather than in isolation (Morin et al. 2007; Wang and Liu 2020) and an impression of congruency between individual cues such as background music and the overall ambiance has a positive impact on people's experience (Demoulin 2011; Helmefalk and Hultén 2017). Given the studio's positioning within a specific aesthetic regime, it is expected to also keep up with music trends and include a "legitimised" soundtrack instead of one that could be associated with poor taste or restricted to a niche. In a place that caters to a mainstream audience and seeks to promote tattooing in a positive light, it is expected that human interactions will be friendly rather than intimidating and the process will prioritise customers' sense of ***comfort***. Once again the aesthetic experience establishes a clear distinction between this studio and the traditional parlour, distancing the work performed here from stigma.

And once more, such interventions also have an impact on how the space is perceived to be gendered. Steering away from the hypermasculine soundscape that perpetuates intimidation and restricts musical appreciation to a male-dominated niche, the studio creates a more welcoming environment without necessarily appealing to associations with femininity.

After the tattoo: back to social media

After a tattoo is finished, artists and clients take pictures of the final product. The studio is equipped with a ring light for that purpose and each artist has a preferred corner to use as a background. For artists, this is an important step in generating content for their social media portfolio and therefore attracting more customers. For clients, it is a way to register a memory and share their experience with their social media followers. In either case, both expect some form of ***validation*** through those digital interactions.

Ryan points out that, a decade ago, TV shows used to be the benchmark for tattooing, but now social media dictates what is cool in the industry. However, it is not just any social media: data from the studio survey (Appendix 1) shows that the traditional shops are more active on Facebook, while contemporary studios often ignore that platform and have a strong presence on Instagram. This difference can be explained by a generational gap — younger artists and shop managers tend to keep more up to date with technology trends. However, the type of audience on each platform is more likely a key factor: it has been long reported that Facebook is losing its popularity among young people as it has become "too mainstream" and populated by older folks (Miller 2013; Sweney and De Lis 2018). This is consistent with recent data on social media demographics that shows that Instagram users are younger, more racially diverse and less politically conservative than those on Facebook (Gramlich 2021; Pew 2021). Moreover, although Facebook and Instagram are owned by the same company and both platforms are constantly updated by unashamedly mimicking functionalities of other popular apps such as Snapchat and TikTok, their aesthetics and vernaculars have evolved quite differently (Leaver et al. 2020). Instagram is a primarily visual medium that has attracted an audience of cultural intermediaries since its introduction. Over time, the platform has overcome the niche vintage-photography appeal to become the preferred social media of celebrities and trendsetters, granting the platform its lasting "cool" appeal.

Instagram users are particularly known for carefully curating their content to only show (or even manufacture) the best side of their lives. Emulating digital influencers, "regular" Instagram users broadcast their experiences, host Q&A sessions about their personal lives and make a point of checking in to trendy locations and tagging brands in their posts — even if they only have a handful of followers and no commercial endorsement (Ki and Kim 2019). Such behaviour is shared by many clients here (Figure 4.3), who not only generate their own online content but are excited by the possibility of being tagged or reposted by the studio account. Such customers make explicit the "staging" character of aestheticised experiences and how their engagement with tattoos can be a more public than private matter. Many of my interviewees, however, have their social media accounts set to private, so they share their experiences with a more restricted audience.

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Figure 4.3. Examples of user-generated content tagging this studio and other businesses.

Megan posted a few snippets from her tattoo appointment at the studio on her Instagram stories. She asked her artist for permission — which most people take as a given — and went for the "classics": a selfie while lying on the table and a mirror selfie once the piece was finished. More than sharing that moment with friends, she says, "I like to support local businesses and being able to do that through social media as well is awesome". This comes from her own experience: she is a hairdresser and manages the social media for her personal hair portfolio and for the beauty salon she works at, aside from her personal account for friends and family. This position is consistent with the strategies employed by female artists as an effective way of targeting their audience: by sharing this experience with her social circle, Megan is advertising the artist to individuals who have similar habitus and cultural capital to her and therefore are likely to enjoy the same type of tattoo work. As discussed in Chapter 2, this cycle of support makes the work sustainable and independent from the sanctions of potential gatekeepers.

This online practice informs the artists' offline routines as well: photographing the finished tattoos is an expected step in the process, sometimes being more about the performance than the outcome. For example, Jennifer says she always takes pictures of the tattoos, even when she has no intention of publishing them on social media, just to please her customers and give them the positive feeling of having a piece that is worth photographing. After all, what people crave from digital interactions is precisely the positive feedback and validation of their choices (Sheldon and Bryant 2016; O'Donnell 2018) — something particularly important when it comes to tattoos that are going to stay on their bodies (supposedly) forever. While in traditional tattooing the subcultural gatekeepers are the ones who legitimise (or not) certain tattoos

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Figure 4.4. Examples of comments on the studio's Instagram posts.

as "good" or "appropriate" based on their own strict set of parameters, in experiences like this validation can come from the client's own social circle, likely composed of people who understand their particular aesthetic aspirations. The positive feedback is evident in the short and emoji-heavy comments on the studio's Instagram posts (Figure 4.4). Such interactions can be empowering for clients and artists looking to challenge the established aesthetic ideals of the field — which are often clearly gendered, as discussed in Chapter 3 — and to experiment with other possibilities.

This type of organic content and the positive feedback that comes with it act as free publicity for a business, so it is often incentivised. Instagram consumers are very aware of the types of images that would be approved by their peers (O'Donnell 2018) and as a consequence many businesses now have areas and elements specifically designed to be "Instagrammable" (Fairs 2018; Lange 2019), something that is no different at this studio. The mirrors all over the walls, for example, are very inviting for selfies (Figure 4.5). There is also the waiting area — containing the timber wall with plants and the neon script — which is one of the first things clients encounter when entering the space and what they see while waiting. Even though it is separated from the tattooing area, it participates in people's routines: the clients capture it to post on their stories, publicly checking in at the studio, and the artists use it as a background to photograph their finished work. The quote immediately appeals to the audience's cultural capital by referencing the lyrics of "Juicy" by The Notorious B.I.G. or, for the less fluent in hip hop culture, inviting them to imagine what the said "dream" is. Either way, the quote signals a playful mood that is social media ready and, along with the other aesthetic cues, helps create a certain anticipatory atmosphere in the minds of people who have not yet been to the studio. While this anticipation in traditional parlours can be fuelled by uncertainty and intimidation based on how tattoo culture is stereotypically represented in traditional media such as reality TV shows, the turn to social media has the potential for telling different stories. Here, the anticipation is one of excitement and curiosity, informed by the light mood and curated aesthetic captured in Instagram content. Moreover, since those videos and pictures are produced through the lenses of clients, they have a more personal and relatable character that portrays the experience as accessible.

Aside from the social media action, what follows the studio exit is the aftercare. Once a piece is finished and the photos are taken, clients have their tattoos covered with a film dressing that will keep it secure for the first couple of days. Most clients appreciate the convenience and trust the dressing's efficiency as a medical item. Moreover, as a relatively new and expensive material, this is another sign of distinction between contemporary studios and traditional parlours that still use cling wrap and tape to cover a fresh tattoo. The studio and the artists promptly make themselves available to answer questions regarding the healing process, since this form of post-service support is essential in guaranteeing clients' satisfaction.

Receiving a tattoo can be an intense experience — not only because of the physical pain, but also because of the stress of having a permanent mark on skin. It puts clients in a vulnerable position where they have to trust another individual to touch and alter their bodies in order to materialise an idea charged with matters of self expression. And, as much as they trust their artist, there is always some uncertainty around

what the final result is going to look like, how it will be received by people around them and if they will outgrow the piece over time. While people who are part of the traditional tattoo subcultures have their own relationship with this experience, when it comes to a mainstream audience it seems understandable that people would seek an environment that somehow minimises feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

Counterbalancing such feelings, the studio's atmosphere supports the ***welcoming*** mood that praised by many clients. It does so by evoking a feeling of ***familiarity*** through its likeness to other spaces and experiences that are part of the client's routine, as well as the artist's relatability in terms of habitus. There is also an impression of ***safety*** related to its perceived cleanliness and lack of the obscurity that usually surrounds traditional parlours. Moreover, sensory stimuli such as light, smells and sound, in combination with the staff's friendly attitudes, promote a ***relaxing*** experience during the procedure. All these components signal a prioritisation of clients' sense of ***comfort*** during the experience. Such feelings are reinforced as the studio distances itself aesthetically from traditional tattooing and, consequently, from its societal stigma and subcultural capital.

When it comes to the online space occupied by the studio, this plays an important role in establishing ***affinity*** between artists' and clients' aesthetic expectations. Instagram popularity gives the studio credibility, not only in terms of being an established business in which adequate health procedures are more likely to be followed but, most importantly, because it is evidence that the work performed there is well-received by an aestheticised community. This provides both artists and clients with a sense of ***validation*** and reassurance that their choices will be perceived as tasteful by their peers.

Many components of this experience are aligned with the feminist strategies discussed in Chapter 3: affinity only emerges when people see themselves and their aesthetic interests represented in a space; comfort can only be achieved when individuals perceive themselves to be safe and cared for; the possibility of validation from their own community instead of subcultural gatekeepers gives participants a sense of empowerment. The ways such principles are enacted in this studio are specific to its audience but, ultimately, the intention of promoting an atmosphere that is welcoming rather than intimidating, cooperative rather than competitive, is what makes a Boutique Studio like this one a potentially more inclusive space than the traditional parlour.

Figure 4.5. Examples of user content generated at the studio.

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While such changes have been enabled by the aestheticisation of tattooing, the process can contradictorily compromise its positive outcomes. This is evident, for example, when the studio is perceived to be inaccessible in terms of appointment availability and pricing or when there is an overreliance on social media feedback in order to fully enjoy the experience and resulting work. Nonetheless, the overall aesthetic experience of the studio seems to be genuinely perceived in a positive way by artists and clients, although the lack of criticism might be related to discomfort in providing negative feedback while present in the space.

Despite women representing the majority of the clientele, this is not an all-female or female-owned studio, which suggests that the benefits of the cultural change are not limited to women. Ryan, who reported overall positive experiences in traditional parlours in the past, still prefers the "more inclusive and more art-based" culture that is fostered in this studio: "that's what I love about working here, you got all different cultures and backgrounds and genders … If you like tattooing and you like art, it doesn't really matter". Such a change in atmosphere even influenced the way Matthew, who worked for six years in traditional parlours before joining this studio three years ago, practises and relates to tattooing:

> *When I started tattooing, I was definitely in a certain direction. I guess my attitude has changed over the years doing it. I was pretty headstrong to some point, I really wanted to pursue and do my own art. I guess I matured as I did this for longer and I realised that tattooing isn't about what I want and what I wanna do necessarily. It's about working with the person and making them happy with the outcome. Not every tattoo I do is gonna become a big folio piece and I became pretty at ease and comfortable with that … I've adjusted my viewpoint of it all.*

While there are other factors that have influenced this movement, such as the financial advantage of working with a larger mainstream audience, Matthew describes his current relationships with the studio space, with his colleagues and with his clients as better than they used to be. Although he does not see this studio as perfect, he appreciates being in a space that is cared for, has a lighter mood and has no competition. As for himself, he still visits his old friends in more traditional parlours to get tattooed: "it's good to stick your head back into that and feel if you're not missing out on that again. But it's almost a different world there". Cases like his inspire some hope that these two worlds can respectfully coexist.

Moreover, Matthew's experience is evidence of the potential of atmospheric configurations in promoting change. Had he stayed in traditional parlours, he would likely have remained critical of the cultural shift rather than considering the possibilities that arise from it. However, by sensorially and affectively experiencing the shift in his everyday practice at this studio, he is now open to a new way of engaging with tattooing that considers more carefully the people on the other side of his interactions. Other statements throughout this chapter, such as Laura's and Jacqueline's, show how their aesthetic and emotional engagement with this studio made them feel safer and more confident in their choices than they did in environments that atmospherically reinforced a historically exclusionary culture. This means the cultural shift in tattooing is not only ***represented in*** but also ***happening through*** atmospheric experiences, which are capable of unsettling the unequal power dynamics between artists and clients, gatekeepers and newcomers, men and women, that have traditionally dominated the field.

This case study provides insights not only into the ways artists and clients navigate the cultural shift in tattooing, but also into the possibilities that arise from such changes. The sensory nature of this investigation can inform ways of thinking about the atmospheric configurations of other tattoo studios or even other types of space that are going through a similar process of aestheticisation. More importantly, such insights signal opportunities to explore the senses of affinity, comfort and validation when designing spaces and experiences that seek to include people who would not feel entitled to participate otherwise. The following chapter will discuss in further detail how those concepts can inform a feminist practice.

Chapter 5

Aesthetics and Affect

A framework for experiences in contemporary tattooing

The case study in Chapter 4 provides important insights into the affective and aesthetic character of the studio experience for both artists and clients. In this chapter I discuss how the concepts of affinity, comfort and validation identified in the case study are coherent with the feminist subversion strategies employed by women in contemporary tattooing, addressed in Chapter 3, and how they can be associated with the process of aestheticisation more broadly. Drawing from these conclusions, I develop a framework for understanding the affective nature of an individual's aesthetic engagement with contemporary tattoo culture in a studio. Within the process of cultural change, the framework offers a way of thinking atmospherically when designing spaces and experiences that seek to include people who would not feel entitled to participate in tattooing otherwise. In addition, I argue that an affective understanding might be useful in addressing the risks and shortcomings of aestheticisation. Finally, I reflect on the ways this framework can inform a feminist tattoo practice and the potential of such an orientation.

Affect and the changes in the field

By analysing the ways people engage affectively and aesthetically with tattoo culture within the studio space, this study examines affective practices that are mediated by materiality and spaciality, and the ways those relate to gendered power dynamics. Following Ahmed (2014, 208), here I do not decouple affect from emotion, since emotions "involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected", and I understand them not as psychological states but as social and cultural practices — "emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (ibid., 10). Moreover, in accordance with Wetherell's understanding of affect as "embodied meaning-making" (2012, 14), I approach tattoo encounters in terms of affective practices in which "bits of the body … get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life" (ibid.).

Affect is a fruitful concept because it blurs the boundaries between the personal and the social as it "circulates" between people and "sticks" to them and it allows the exploration of possibilities that arise from affective engagements. As stated by Lisa Blackman (2008, 41), "it is not that affect or emotion is simply 'caught' or transmitted between subjects, but that subjects get 'caught up in' relational dynamics that exhibit a psychic or intensive pull". As such, there is no guarantee that people will get caught up in affective exchanges, but when affect does stick, it can have powerful effects. According to Ahmed, "Emotions ***do things***, and they align individuals with communities — or bodily space with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments" (2004, 119, emphasis in original).

Therefore, affect dialogues with the Bourdieusian concepts that permeate this study in relation to the ways affect can unite or separate tattoo artists and tattooed people, and how it moves these individuals to occupy (or not) certain spaces. As Wetherell et al. claim: "The patterning of affect is constrained and enabled by various iterations of one's cultural formations, positioning, and social locations, and these bring into play questions of identity and core issues about the kind of person one is and could be" (2020, 15). The affective components of the feminist strategies, which are made evident in the interpersonal exchanges that take place in specific physical and social spaces, are determinant of how a woman perceives she could be a *tattooed woman* or a *female tattoo artist*.

Revisiting previous chapters and including additional evidence from the literature and media, the following subsections outline how the findings from the case study relate to contemporary tattoo culture more broadly. Here I treat the concepts of affinity, comfort and validation as affective categories that encompass a variety of feelings and sensations (familiarity and safety, for example). I use these categories to discuss the ways in which a feminist orientation can, through affects, challenge established structures and promote cultural change. Although the analysis is divided according to the three categories, it considers how they are interconnected and, to an extent, indissociable.

Affinity

Affinity first emerged in the case study from the interactions on social media, before the encounter in the studio space. It was made evident in the way clients reported immediately identifying with an artist's style and describing the tattoo art as something they could see on themselves. It was also apparent in the studio's strategy of carefully curating its Instagram portfolio and positioning itself as a trendy and relaxed space — aesthetic choices that resonated with its target audience.

Jennifer Mason (2018, 154) defines affinity as "the revelation or charisma of potent connections that feel kindred in some way". Such connections are "fundamentally relational" but not always positive, since they "can be manifest as affinities of opposition and alterity just as much as of empathy and resemblance" (ibid.). While Mason is concerned with affinities as "connective charges and energies that are of interest in themselves and not because of what they connect" (2018, 12), I employ the concept in this framework focused on what they connect, in conversation with sociological concepts, in order to emphasise certain aspects of affinity regarding power relations. As framed by Threadgold (2020, 61), the social relations of homology or distance that produce feelings of ease or inadequacy are relations of affinity. In Bourdieusian terms, "if habitus is theorised as a collection of accumulated dispositions over time, the way in which those dispositions are therefore enacted, that is, how they emerge or spring forth at any given time, is through affinities" (ibid.).

Since affinity in the case study often emerged in the online space occupied by the studio, it seems more "abstract", based on impressions and expectations. Nevertheless, as stated by Mason (2018, 15), "online and 'virtual' interactions are also full of sensations" since they bring together faces, bodies and environments — interactions that are physically experienced when we look at, listen through and touch our devices. This means that, even when experienced virtually, affinity has an important aesthetic and affective potential. Moreover, while it emerged more prominently at the start of the process, it permeated the entire experience and was also related to the way people resonated with the studio atmosphere.

Firstly, this is because affinity refers to alignment in terms of taste: "taste is what brings together things and people that go together" (Bourdieu 2010, 238). Part of the cultural change in tattooing refers to the fact that many people no longer walk into the nearest parlour for a standard flash tattoo, but actively research to find an artist who specialises in a particular style they identify with to develop bespoke work (Kosut 2014). As more women participate in tattooing, they bring their own aesthetic interests and repertoires, broadening the possibilities of what tattoos could be and therefore making room for other energies of affinity to arise.

For example, Korean artist Seyoon Kim started in a traditional shop but quickly moved away from that aesthetic to pursue small, colourful tattoos that "feel like fairy tales". She says, "my drawing may seem relatively cute and dainty compared to those traditional ones, yet I believe my tattoos run deep, expressing more than just the visual look. I think I am a perfect artist for clients who want warm and convivial drawings" (Clayton 2019). Regarding the relationship with her clients, she says, "when their stories meet my design skills, we create their perfect tattoo, like serendipity. It is the result of their experience and my imagination" (ibid.).

Through affinities, tattooing becomes a collaborative process in which clients' stories and motivations meet artists' skills and imagination to create something shared. Aligned with a feminist ethics of engagement, it dissolves hierarchies that position the artist as expert and challenges rules that frame only certain aesthetic choices as "right". This movement is empowering to individuals because they no longer need to conform with a restrictive idea of being (or not) "the type of person who gets a tattoo" — instead, they can use tattoos, just like beauty and fashion, to articulate "the type of person" they wish to be as they stage their desired lifestyles (Böhme 2003). The process benefits artists as well, since they are able to connect with people who appreciate and support their style instead of submitting to a type of work they do not find creatively fulfilling.

Another important component of affinity is the alignment of values. Beyond their tastes, tattoo studios' presence on social media often makes evident their policies and practices. For example, Hemlock Tattoo[37] in Calgary (Canada) describes itself as "an intentional tattoo shop committed to reducing harm in the tattoo industry", referring to its position as a "female owned" shop that seeks to move away from "outdated norms" and provide a "space for community, growth, education and transparency, where ethical consent is always at the forefront". This type of positioning allows certain affinities to arise as it communicates to artists and clients they are ***welcome*** in the space — not only ***safe*** and ***respected***, but also ***appreciated***. In that sense, affinity is powerful because it enables not only the feeling that one could or should be in a space, but also the feeling that others are happy to have them there. Such an energy is foundational for feminist practices that aim to create more inclusive spaces.

Despite external influences and the inevitable connection with the later process of validation, the initial evaluation of affinity ultimately relies on an internal — or at least internalised — set of values: how clients and artists see each other as able to understand their own tastes and values, and how they see the studio, as an "entity" that represents specific positions, as capable of fulfilling their aesthetic and affective aspirations. In order to achieve this, feminist strategies that increase representation and broaden aesthetic possibility are essential. As a consequence, the experience of affinity is determinant at the beginning of the experience since it affects the individual's motivations and confidence to move forward into the process.

Comfort

The concept of comfort emerged in several instances throughout the case study, connected to physical sensations of wellbeing and feelings of being at ease in the environment. In both circumstances, comfort was strongly associated with the sensory aspects of the studio experience and was therefore present for the duration of the tattoo encounter.

Part of comfort comes from physical sensations. In the case study, participants mentioned how different the soundscape of the studio was compared to traditional parlours, highlighting the absence of the loud machine noise and heavy music that are characteristic of the latter. In these accounts, comfort is associated with sounds and the ability to ***relax,*** influencing the way people engage with pain. Other stimuli such as the brightness and the clean smells were described as sensorially pleasant and associated with physical safety. In this sense, comfort and discomfort can be understood as a "response to the sensuous qualities of the objects and environments" and therefore "belong to the aesthetic realm" (Saito 2007, 224). Contrary to the perpetuation of masculinised stereotypes of toughness and endurance to pain, feminist aesthetic interventions that position the minimisation of physical discomfort as a valid pursuit within tattoo culture create a more accessible enviroment.

Comfort is also related to feelings of familiarity. Monica Degen and Gillian Rose (2012) highlight the role of "perceptual memory" in people's sensory experience of the urban environment as it triggers comparisons of this place with others they have experienced in the past. This can be transposed to tattoo shops: the aesthetic similarity between a Boutique Studio and spaces like beauty salons, spas, cafes and a friend's apartment — examples raised in the case study and other accounts (Bikoff 2017; Bergstein 2018; Watts 2021) — favours affinities of resemblance. These can only emerge when, in consonance with both aestheticised consumption and feminist strategies, a variety of aesthetic experiences are legitimised within tattoo culture. On the other hand, traditional parlours that are loaded with sensory stimuli like tattoo-specific imagery, dark colours and heavy music spark affinities of alterity for people who are not familiar with the subculture and therefore feel excluded from that space. This is clear in the case study when clients who had visited traditional parlours in the past reported no complaints about those artists or the service but still described the experience as ***intimidating***. Therefore comfort can also be understood as "a sensation of being-at-one with the immediate environment that might include the presence of others, together with a combination of memory and anticipation of specific events" (Bissell 2008, 1700).

An essential aspect of the atmospheric configuration of contemporary studios is its opposition to the — either experienced or imagined — atmosphere of traditional tattoo parlours. As present and embodied as the studio experience might be, the way people make sense of the space is indissociable from their previous experiences and expectations of tattoo culture, likely informed by the stigmatised, subcultural and gendered perspective perpetuated by the media until a decade ago. When women subvert the field by challenging the prevailing values of toughness, intimidation and competition — and, intentionally or not, translate their attitudes into aesthetic interventions — the tattoo studio becomes a place where welcome is not only communicated but ***felt***.

37 https://www.instagram.com/hemlocktattoostudio

Comfort can be understood, then, as the embodiment and materialisation of the anticipatory feelings established through affinity. It relates to aesthetic pleasure in terms of both bodily sensations and judgements of taste, and is manifested in feelings of physical safety and emotional connection with the space and the people that occupy it. This means fostering the experience of comfort is fundamental to achieving validation.

Validation

The idea of validation emerged more prominently in the case study once a tattoo was completed. It was apparent in the way artists and clients exchanged positive reactions to the finished piece — such as smiles, verbal compliments, picture-taking — giving the client reassurance about their decision and making the artist confident about the recognition of their work. This was also present in social media interactions, where artists and clients shared pictures of the tattoo on Instagram expecting those to be received with positive feedback from a larger community. While artists seemed more "objective" when sharing those images, focusing on the technical presentation of the tattoos in order to compose a good-quality portfolio and attract more work, clients were concerned about how those pictures were staged. They often composed mirror selfies that showed the studio space or lifestyle shots in which they tagged other brands, for example, in doing so creating a narrative that encompassed other aspects of the aesthetic experience of becoming and being tattooed. This indicates that validation extended the aesthetic experience beyond the studio timeline.

Validation can be seen as a confirmation or reinforcement of the affinities that emerged in the beginning of the experience which happens with the fulfilment (or exceeding) of the expectations that were previously established. It is also an expansion of the energies of affinity in order to reach and connect with people who were not directly involved in the process, such as the client's social circle and the artist's potential new clients. This exchange generated feelings of acceptance and recognition that further enabled individuals to establish a positive connection with the process.

Therefore, although connected to the self, validation happens mostly based on external values — it relies on other people's perceptions of the work performed as good, appropriate and tasteful. This contingency on taste means that the conditions for validation are hard to generalise, since aesthetic and cultural evaluations are variable among different groups of people. This is why female subversion is relevant: as women broaden the possibilities in the field, validation can come from different perspectives, such as one's own peers, instead of relying on strict and exclusive subcultural standards established by the gatekeepers. As a consequence, the general stigma against tattoos is also mitigated,[38] since tattoos become decoupled from such standards that are perceived as negative by mainstream culture.

This means that validation can be empowering when manifested as support and encouragement among people who are connected through positive affinities. This happens, for example, when tattooed individuals perceive approval from their social circle or when artists create networks of mutual support by endorsing each other's work, values and practices — part of the feminist subversion strategies. However, validation can assume a negative connotation when it is not achieved or when there is an overdependence on it. For example, tattoo artist Julim Rosa says that the main challenge for artists today "is the monster of constant validation. Social media feels like we need to put out there something great all the time, every day, just to feel we are part of it and not missing out" (Clayton 2019b). This pressure affects clients as well: some get upset when the artist does not post pictures of their tattoo on social media, taking it as a sign that they are not proud of the work and therefore the tattoo is "bad" (Astral 2017). This behaviour is consistent with the nature of aestheticised consumption — in which desires are "intensified rather than satisfied" (Böhme 2003, 81) — and signals a need for criticality and caution when navigating the complexity of affective experiences.

The affective framework

The framework (Figure 5.1) represents the affective components of the tattoo studio experience for both artists and clients. The affective categories are presented separately in order to highlight certain aspects of the experience and suggest some temporality based on the circumstances that allow them to emerge before, during and after the studio interaction. Given the focus of this study on the sensory experience and interpersonal exchanges that happen at the moment of giving and receiving a tattoo, this portion of the process stands at the centre, but does not diminish the relevance of the other stages that surround it. Circle-shaped, it portrays the flowing nature of the experience and accounts for the possibility of restarting the cycle. However, the process is not neatly sequential and it is impossible to analyse each category independently since they are contingent on each other. They can also be experienced at different intensities, depending on the importance the individual attributes to each component.

This framework provides a basis for understanding the affective nature of an individual's aesthetic engagement with contemporary tattoo culture in a tattoo studio. Although developed from the insights of the case study, the examination of those findings in terms of the feminist strategies of inclusion in the field discussed in Chapter 3, along with the inclusion of additional accounts from media and secondary interviews, shows the broader relevance of the concepts. The framework applies

38 This is a general statement about the increased acceptability of tattoos in Western cultures. As discussed in previous chapters, tattooed people experience stigma in different ways depending on their social identity and position.

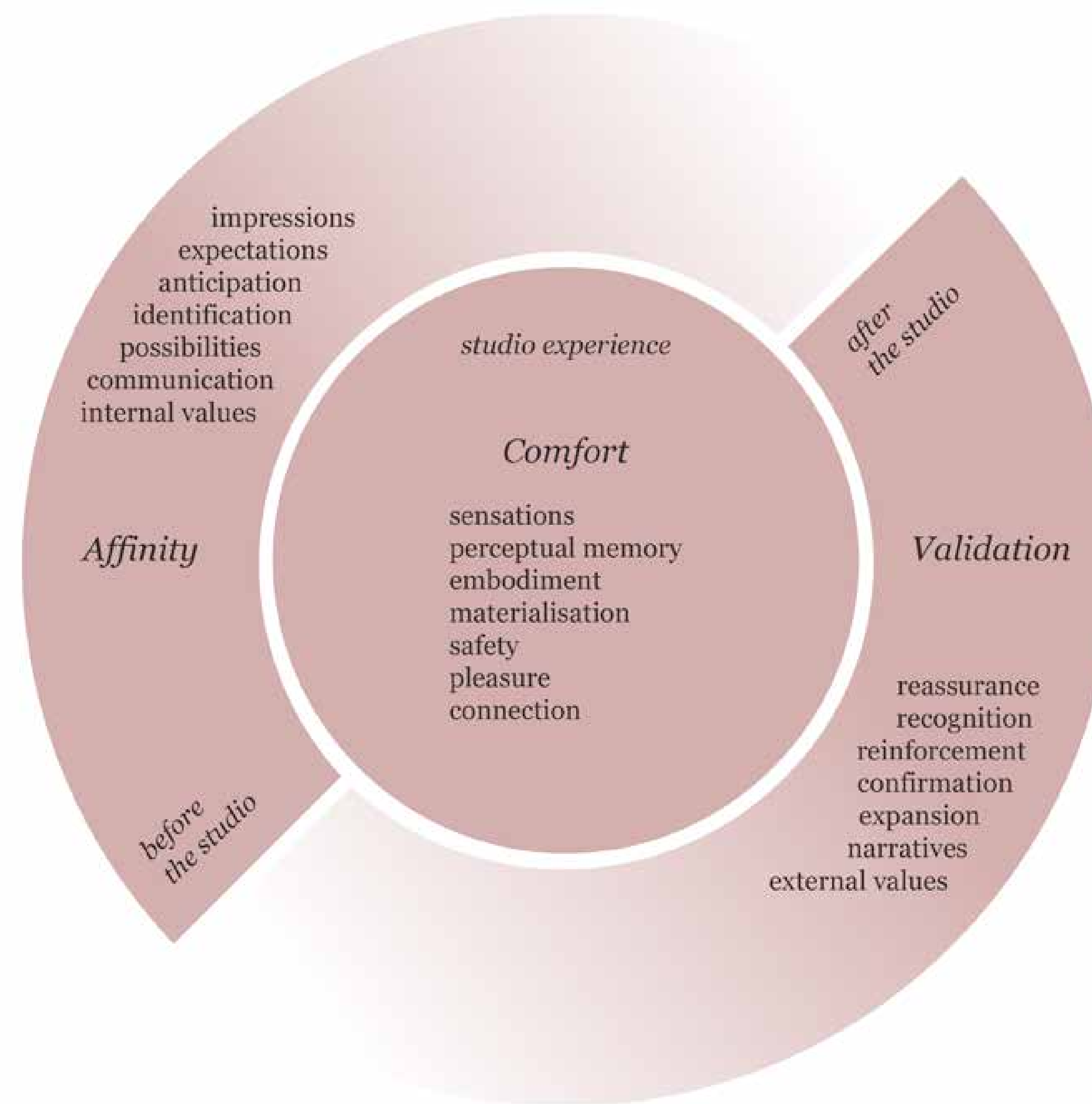

Figure 5.1. Affective framework for the tattoo studio experience. Illustration by author.

to both clients' and artists' experiences, considering those intrinsically connected, and recognises that the affective categories might mean different things to different people and, therefore, will be made evident in the studio through distinct interventions.

In this section, I discuss how the proposed framework informs an understanding of practices that are simultaneously affective and aesthetic in the context of tattooing and how it can be used to address some of the concerns raised in Chapter 3, offering a foundation for further studies and practices focused on designing spaces and experiences that seek to include people who would not feel entitled to participate in tattooing otherwise.

Aesthetic-affective practices

Drawing on Wetherell's (2012) aforementioned definition of affective practice, Wiesse (2019, 132) frames affectivity as "an ongoing practical accomplishment" rather than a dimension that "'preexist(s)' within practices". Such an understanding places the affects that emerge within aesthetic practices as equally important to the aesthetic components themselves. The embodied nature of affect makes it an inherently aesthetic effort and the framework makes this relationship evident in the context of tattooing, understood here as an aesthetic-affective practice. Developed with an atmospheric orientation, the framework accounts for feelings and sensations that are necessarily dynamic and situated within an aesthetic experience.

Wiesse also highlights how practice unfolds in a processual manner, meaning that "participants need to be able to refer to past meanings of their practice as well as to anticipate future stages of their practice" in order to achieve cohesion in their activities (ibid.). The very intention of this framework is to provide a reference for the processual assessment of past practices and the anticipation of future actions within the practice of tattooing. While there is always a processual unfolding in aesthetic practices, affect enables these processes to be assessed in terms of (inter)personally meaningful performances. This relational orientation is essential when conceiving feminist practices.

Following this thread, the exhibition accompanying this exegesis explores the nuances of these aesthetic-affective entanglements in tattoo practice, using the framework to articulate the affective and aesthetic components of the studio experience and to guide the viewer through a reflective immersion in the process. Limitations regarding health and safety procedures and public liability prevented the installation of a popup tattoo studio within the university. However, the experience that occurs in such spaces can be, at least partially, documented in video.

Videos allow a visual and auditory documentation of processes and experiences that are at the core of this investigation and, given the importance of spatiality in experiencing the atmospheres discussed in this study, I opted to arrange the videos in an installation. The physical exhibition was an opportunity to create an aesthetic and affective experience in itself which could strategically highlight and augment certain components of the studio experience that have shown to be relevant throughout the study, such as colour, light and sound. Moreover, the installation afforded a more immersive experience by exploring multimedia resources that influence the aesthetic perception, such as different projection scales, soundscape transitions and interactions with the designed space.

The short videos support the affective categories presented in the framework by clarifying their definitions, illustrating their applications and guiding viewers through a reflective engagement with the feelings and sensations that emerge within them. The videos were broadcast simultaneously throughout the space, resembling the multiple interactions that take place concurrently at the studio. By circulating within the gallery, the viewer can weave these together through their own memories and expectations, actively building a situated understanding of what an aesthetic-affective practice can be.

The curation and exhibition design resulted from using the framework to reflect on my own practice and the ways it has changed over the course of this research. More than communicating findings, the exhibition has been designed as an invitation to reflect on matters of gender and power dynamics surrounding tattooing, a topic that can still be surrounded by myths and preconceptions for many people. By emphasising the affective-aesthetic nature of tattoo practice and its influence on the cultural change in tattooing, this reflection is intentionally framed in terms of relationality and possibility. The following subsection discusses the implications of such an orientation in terms of a tattoo practice.

The potential of thinking affectively

In Chapter 3 I discuss some concerns associated with the subversion strategies employed by women, namely, emotional labour, inequalities and fragmentation, and neoliberal appropriation. I argue that the affective framework can be useful in addressing these risks by providing a structure for the evaluation of current practices and spaces, as well as guidance for the design of new environments and ways of working. In this subsection I further explore this potential using additional examples and a reflection on aesthetics and affective intentions.

As previously discussed, certain outcomes of emotional labour can be perceived positively, especially by workers who are self-supervised. From my own experience, realising that I had more to offer than just my technical skills — which are far from great when one is just starting — helped me navigate the insecurities and frustrations of starting a new career. By being more than a "tattoo machine operator" I made friends and loyal clients, relationships that make my work much easier and more pleasant. However, I have also experienced burnout from trying to please everyone all the time. I have felt uncomfortable around clients who demanded even more than I was providing and unappreciated by those who did not reciprocate my consideration.

Performing emotional work in itself is not necessarily negative — considering humans are social beings, it is inevitable. It becomes damaging when it is imposed, restrictive, concealed, excessive and undervalued. By focusing on affect, the framework brings the issues of emotional labour to the forefront and prompts us to think critically about those limits. Hochschild (2012, 20) states that one of the goals of emotional labour is to produce a "proper state of mind in others". What "proper" means is usually determined by a top-down managerial decision that is customer-centric to the detriment of workers. Considering there is relative autonomy in tattoo work, there is an opportunity to think affectively about what "states of mind" can be beneficial to ***both*** artists and clients, and how those can be achieved.

From an interpersonal perspective, the framework can highlight the points of potential affective consonance and dissonance among artists and clients, informing actions and protocols that seek to minimise frustration and miscommunication and prevent the need for additional emotional work to fill the gap. For example, there is a shared joy between artist and client when they look at the finished tattoo and both are satisfied with the result. The affinity, both aesthetic and affective, means that emotions are actually felt and displaying them is not an additional burden. On the other hand, the secretarial process of booking the appointment can be full of excitement and doubt for the client (especially for a first tattoo), while for an established artist it is often ordinary. This dissonance might lead the client to feel dismissed or force the artist into displaying an enthusiasm they do not actually feel. Acknowledging such differences is important when designing interventions that benefit both sides. Following this example, the artist could, for instance, provide clients with a welcoming video that answers the most common questions before their appointment.

Such a concern can also be translated into the studio design. Since the framework has been developed from an atmospheric perspective, it also accounts for the indissociable nature of affective and aesthetic experiences: although interpersonal exchanges are crucial in the process, other cues captured by the senses can also spark feelings and sensations. From this understanding, design interventions in the studio space can assist in inducing the desired state of mind, therefore alleviating the emotional labour required to achieve that state through personal interaction. This can be interpreted and translated in multiple ways depending on the circumstances. Design interventions can be used, for instance, to support boundaries that might be delicate to raise in conversation. Speaking from a discrete but very similar industry to tattooing, Melbourne beauty salon owner Donna Sheridan says (Flux 2021):

> *A client will overshare to a hairdresser, and then a hairdresser will overshare back to make the client feel comfortable … And then, all of a sudden, you're speaking about extremely personal things. So I focus on the environment — how things look, how the temperature is, what music is playing — to make it comfortable to not [have to] speak. Then the client is relaxed and feels like they don't need to [overshare]. It means the atmosphere is lighter for everyone.*

Sheridan is concerned about the burden that excessive intimacy can place on workers, who might end up taking on their client's emotional issues (Toerien and Kitzinger 2007; Hanson 2019). Thinking about design interventions that would make the space aesthetically enjoyable in itself, her intention is to minimise the perception of an

"awkward silence" that might push clients into oversharing. In another example, Australian tattoo artist Caitlin Thomas (2021) describes her intention in designing her new private studio in Adelaide (Figure 5.2), an intimate space fitted out with colourful prints, tapestries and plants:

> *I've designed this space as a sensory-friendly environment for people like me that find the world a bit too loud and overstimulating at times. It's a space for everyone to feel welcome — all shapes, colours and sizes, LGBTQIA and all genders. I want my clients and friends to feel safe, calm and free of judgement while being tattooed in a private, one on one setting … Getting tattooed can often feel vulnerable and a lot of trust is involved, I just want to make the experience as smooth and easy as possible.*

The term "sensory-friendly" designates practices that seek to minimise the sensory overload that leads neurodiverse individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum, to withdraw from social situations (Ostovar 2009). Moreover, she acknowledges that for many clients, especially those who might feel exposed and judged in public spaces, tattooing is a moment of vulnerability. By translating these concerns into the physical space, Thomas makes the studio more inclusive and reduces the emotional work needed from her clients to overcome their potential discomfort and from her in making them feel welcome despite a potentially overwhelming environment.

This intention also relates to the inequalities and consequent fragmentation among women that threatens the movement for a more inclusive field. While the framework certainly does not offer a solution to such complex social problems, it can assist in surfacing certain affective and aesthetic practices that might go unnoticed or unquestioned in processes of exclusion. However, in order to achieve this, an intersectional sensibility is imperative. This is made evident in the way Faith Phillips, a Black and transgender tattoo artist from Chicago (USA), talks about her shop in an interview (Rebekah 2020):

> *Tattoo spaces that are queer-owned and operated, they're all sacred — but a lot of those spaces, they're also very niche, and also white, right? … it's kind of like this boutique thing, where just going in and maybe picking something off the wall, or just getting a working-class tattoo, like I said, a little cursive name with a banner, is maybe something that you've gotta really look for, right? [At Faith's shop] if you want boutique, high-art, we've got you. But it's also, it's a street shop. So, you can come in and say "this is my idea" and somebody's gonna draw that idea for you on the spot.*

Phillips seems to translate that intention into the studio design: the pictures available on its social media[39] show pride flags, plants and wooden masks

Figure 5.2. Interior of Banksia Tattoo Studio in Adelaide (Australia).

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39 https://www.instagram.com/wishmelucktattoo/

This image/material has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 5.3. Interior of Wish Me Luck tattoo studio in Chicago (USA).

coexisting with a menu of flash designs hanging on the wall and vintage barber chairs (Figure 5.3). While this eclectic setup is not guaranteed to cater to everyone as she might optimistically expect, it does take into consideration clients who, like Phillips, find themselves in a particular intersection of gender, class and sexuality (and consequently taste) that is often marginalised.

This approach contrasts with more commodified experiences in contemporary tattooing. Take, for example, celebrity artist JonBoy's studio (Figure 5.4) in the lobby of Moxy Times Square Hotel in New York City (USA). Hotel guests, as well as his A-list clients, have preferred access to get one of his signature mini tattoos at a minimum price of USD1000. The single-artist space is described as "a hypebeast's[40] dream" where "a Gucci tattoo table takes centre stage, while one wall is adorned with an epic, edited collection of designer items including Supreme boxing gloves, as well as super personal touches like neon prayer hands" (Fields 2019). The studio also has curtains custom designed with a sketch of JonBoy's face and hands as a backdrop for post-session photoshoots for social media. Here, the space is designed to feel ***exclusive*** rather than inclusive. Instead of being private, the experience is expected to be as public as possible, since it is a matter of status. Although JonBoy himself is said to have an approachable personality, the whole experience is inaccessible for most in terms of economic, cultural and social capital, and this is made evident in the aesthetic decisions in the studio.

Encounters with JonBoy seem to represent the hyper-aestheticised nature of certain postmodern experiences that can be framed as problematic: they rely on the unsatisfiable search for status, overconsumption and conformity with certain oppressive standards of mainstream culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, this neoliberal appropriation of the practice can lead to manipulative narratives that create an illusion of empowerment while being devoid of real social significance. However, the experiences provided by the other aforementioned practitioners, which seek more inclusive and respectful atmospheres, do not deviate from the process of aestheticisation either — they just differ in ***intention***. As argued by Böhme (2003) and Featherstone (2007), aesthetic consumption is ambivalent: it can be a place of pleasure and possibility as much as of manipulation and exploitation. People will always experience these two sides simultaneously, although in varied intensities. Therefore, the difference in intention — in working towards possibility rather

40 A hypebeast is a person devoted to acquiring fashionable items, especially clothing and shoes, in an ostentatious manner.

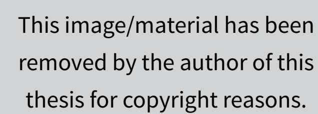

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Figure 5.4. Interior of JonBoy's studio at Moxy Times Square Hotel. Michael Kleinberg, 2019. https://www.jetsetter.com/magazine/jonboy-tattoos-moxy-times-square/

than manipulation, fulfilment rather than permanent craving — is an affective one. And if affect is, as proposed by Ahmed (2014), not contained in an object or body but circulates across a social and psychic field, this becomes more than just a matter of individual pleasure as neoliberal logics might suggest. It is about the value derived from the engagements that happen in these shared spaces.

Ultimately, the framework offers an invitation to wonder about what types of affect we want to nurture and how we materialise this intention. As I state in the Introduction, it is not intended to be a set of guidelines or a toolkit, but a structure through which we can ask ethical questions and act towards our feminist goals of respect, autonomy and inclusion. As seen in the examples, this can happen in many distinct ways and in different contexts because, although the framework might highlight the aesthetic attributes of the tattoo studio and the experiences that happen inside this space, it also concerns how these elements facilitate the aesthetic pleasure that can be derived from existing in the world as a tattooed person.

Conclusion

In this study I discuss the cultural changes in tattooing frIn this study I discussed the cultural changes in tattooing from a feminist perspective in order to investigate what a tattoo practice focused on inclusion and equality might look and feel like. First, I expanded the literature on contemporary tattooing by articulating the historical and cultural developments in tattooing through the analysis of studio environments and by introducing aestheticisation as a phenomenon that underlies the changes in the way people produce and consume tattoos. This emergence has occurred concurrently with the increased participation of women in tattooing, both as artists and as clients. Through analysing the female presence in the field, I discussed how certain women-led practices are determinant of this cultural shift. In order to investigate how such changes are experienced by individuals who engage in tattoo culture, I performed a case study focused on the atmospheric experience in a boutique tattoo studio, discussing how it relates to gender. The resulting insights into the nuances of the aesthetic and affective engagements that happen in that space led to a framework designed to inform studies and practices aimed at creating more inclusive and respectful experiences in tattooing. In conclusion, I argued that a feminist practice in tattooing is necessarily aesthetic-affective and can potentially address the contradictions in the process of aestheticisation through ethical engagements.

While here I focussed on the subversive strategies of women in tattooing who have created a space for themselves away from the traditional subculture, I acknowledge that their work was only possible because of the women who carved their spaces of resistance within the traditional subculture. Their stories can be found in the important work of authors such as Mifflin (2013) and Thompson (2015). Moreover, while I focussed on the participation of women more generally, it is clear throughout this research that it is impossible to ignore how other aspects of women's social identities played an important part in the process. Hence I recommend that future studies address the specificities of the aesthetic and affective experiences of women of colour and queer women, for instance. In addition, the research is limited to the developments of tattoo culture in Western countries, with most of the examples taking place in Australia and North America; therefore, further research is needed in order to understand how the phenomenon is developing in other locations and how gender operates in a diversity of cultural contexts.

The small-scale and qualitative nature of the study has prevented generalisation but attended to the aims of the investigation. I established that I wanted to steer away from binarisms and simplistic understandings of the cultural change in tattooing and the case study was successful in that regard by uncovering the nuances of the aesthetic and affective engagement of individuals with tattoo culture and how those relate to gender. Doing the research ***through*** my practice gave me access to the lived and felt components of these engagements and my research-practice became a ***reflexive*** process in which I could surface tacit knowledge and learn ***with*** others. This was made evident, for instance, in the exchanges I had with research participants who told me they had never thought about certain things before and asked me curious questions about what I had been "discovering" so far. For me, the process has also translated into a better understanding of why my clients choose me as their artist and how they evaluate my work. It has given me a sense of grounding in knowing where I stand within the field and, more importantly, what I can do from this position.

In this sense, the research-practice also became an iterative process in which I incorporated these new learnings into my actions. I now prioritise ongoing relationships with returning clients, for instance, and feel the need to slow down my pace in order to be more intentional in my interactions. I constantly interrogate what interventions I could make in an environment I cannot design myself in order to make it aligned with the values of respect, autonomy and inclusion that I want to have embedded in my practice. I am more mindful of the ways I interact with my colleagues and the impact my work has for the studio because of this position. In sum, I have a clearer roadmap for the near future in terms of what I want my practice to be and how I can achieve that.

In addition to such reflections, establishing connections between my practice and those of other practitioners has revealed affective patterns that are not prescriptive but intentionally framed in terms of possibility. This ultimately responds to the main goal of the research, which is to expand understanding of tattoo practice from a feminist perspective that accounts for the emotional and sensorial ways individuals experience the world.

Therefore, the study contributes to the growing body of research in feminist studies and practice-as-research within the discipline of design. The resulting framework can assist other tattoo practitioners in thinking about their own work as aesthetic-affective practices capable of promoting positive change in the relationships among artists and between artists and clients, as well as in the engagement of those individuals with tattoo culture more generally. The framework also works as a tool to guide practitioners in the implementation of practical solutions in their workspace and workflow that would enable those changes. Although focused on tattooing, the framework can also offer a foundation for further design practices that seek to create more inclusive experiences for services, health and education for instance. Beyond design, it can also inform further projects that examine similar practices such as beauty, personal training and other activities that are traditionally gendered and involve an intimate service relationship and bodily intervention.

Despite making a case for the aestheticisation of tattooing, I have not engaged with the commodification of tattoos as much as other authors who are focused on class issues (DeMello 2000, Dann 2021). It was not my intention to minimise neoliberal market appropriation but to argue that, since it is happening, we need a feminist orientation more than ever to question and resist these processes of appropriation and not let it deter the participation of women in the field. My focus on aesthetics, then, follows Saito's (2017) argument that, since aesthetics has been co-opted by power, we should not deny it or ignore it, but resist by claiming agency over our everyday aesthetic decisions. This means knowing about aesthetics and its potential, reframing aesthetic standards and being able to detect and name what is aesthetically negative to therefore change it. Such a task requires us to consider the aesthetic as ***always*** affective (and vice versa).

Through feminist interventions, tattooing has evolved in a way that seemed inconceivable just a few decades ago. This has shown that aesthetic disruption enables actors to challenge their own assumptions and habits, that emotions align individuals with communities, bodily space with social space. Beyond tattooing, understanding this process is also an invitation to think about what other changes are possible when considering the power of aesthetic-affective affinities.

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Appendix 1

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