

Shifting Tides in the Tattoo Industry: How Tattoo Artists Experience Digitization

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Abstract

Tattoos have been historically associated with outsider groups, but since the practice's "renaissance" of the mid to late twentieth century, tattooing has gained mainstream appeal and its industry has bloomed. However, studies exploring this change have largely neglected to fully consider the effect that the modern digital age has had on tattooing as both an industry and a culture. Artists express varying levels of ambivalence toward these changes, explaining that digital spaces, especially social media platforms, have increased public exposure to tattoos and lowered stigma around the practice. But they also demand extra labor from artists in the form of digital content creation and profile maintenance. This study aims to fill a gap in existing literature by considering the impact that the wide-scale adoption of social media as a primary site of self-promotion has had on American tattoo artists, exploring these spaces as integral parts of the modern industry. This study uses a mixed-method grounded theory approach to ethnographic research, where interviews and field observations were recorded and coded to identify patterns of adaptation, negotiation, and cultural redefinition among artists in what I term as the "digitization era" of tattooing. This study is informed by approximately 75 hours of ethnographic fieldwork, consisting of

observations at 14 tattoo shops and 13 interviews with 18 tattoo professionals. This research contributes to the broader discussion of the effects that evolving digital spaces have on subcultural communities and creative industries, particularly exploring the adaptations of their members to changing technological and sociocultural conditions. In the sections to follow, I demonstrate that multiple adaptations are possible, emphasizing the way that tattoo artists exercise agency in their shifting industry while acknowledging that their agency depends on their ability to book clients.

Introduction

In Western culture, tattoos have been historically associated with negative social meanings such as societal deviance and rebellion, marking those that had them as outsiders. Within the United States, tattoos were particularly stigmatized through their association with prison communities and their growing use as signifiers by counterculture groups such as bikers, gangs, hippies, and punks in the mid-twentieth century (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023:383). In the 1960s, many states began to ban the practice of tattooing under the pretense of public health concerns, although the anti-deviance, stigmatizing undertone was clear to those within tattoo culture. These strong negative historical associations, which only began waning in the past half-century, established tattooing as a distinct subcultural practice with no place in mainstream American society, let alone a space for a legitimate industry to meaningfully develop.

Concurrent with its legal suppression, however, the second half of the twentieth century also brought forth what academics have termed as the American tattoo renaissance, a period defined by increased professionalism from artists, better hygiene practices, and major technological developments in tattoo machinery (Burns 2019:31; Kosut 2013:142). Tattoos were increasingly framed not as only subcultural indicators but rather as art, a conceptual shift that occurred primarily through the American public's exposure to tattoo art through celebrities and popular media in the 1990s (Kosut 2013). Through continued exposure, tattooing was commercialized; it began to become popular among wide consumer audiences and was adopted across social classes, solidifying the client base of the current American tattoo industry (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023). Its destigmatization through this commercialization is seen most clearly through the appearance of tattoo imagery in children's products and toys starting in the late 90s and early 2000s (Kosut 2006:1036). Despite this rapid commercialization of tattooing as a practice and the subsequent dilution of the subcultural associations and meanings of tattoos through their mainstream popularity, tattoo artists have been able to retain elements of their subcultural character through protecting tattoo culture. As the industry professionalized and moved into mainstream culture, it was met with the rapid evolution of

digital spaces and online platforms which changed the manner in which tattoos were viewed even further - specifically, making them visible and available to a broader spectrum of potential customers. At the present moment, many tattoo artists feel that these last elements are being stripped away by this online shift, resulting in perceived loss of tattoo culture itself.

Literature on tattoos has historically focused on the motivations behind the act of getting tattooed and the bodies of the tattooed (Sinclair 1909; Fedorenko, Sherlock, and Stuhr 1999; Sarnecki 2001; Kang and Jones 2007), relegating the tattoo artist to the simplified role of practitioner. Even as the focus in the literature has shifted from deviancy to personal expression, in accordance with the American tattoo renaissance, much of it still remains focused on the tattooed, discounting an integral part of the tattoo process: the tattoo artist. It is only in recent years that this massive shift's impact on tattoo artists and the industry generally have been specifically investigated (Rees 2017; Steckdaub-Muller 2018; Becker, de Campos, and Antello 2021). However, even these recent artist-centered analyses have neglected to fully consider the impact that digital spaces, a constant presence in the lives of modern Americans, have had on the industry, its future, and the tattoo artists dependent on it.¹ Understanding how these spaces have reshaped the industry is critical as they directly influence the livelihoods and cultural identity of tattoo artists today.

In this study, I interviewed several tattoo artists to explore their experiences with digital spaces as they relate to the current tattoo industry, focusing primarily on areas that are under-analyzed in tattoo literature but heavily used within the modern tattoo industry, such as the social media platform Instagram. I begin with a brief overview of the history of tattooing in the United States, based primarily on existing scholarship but including perspectives and anecdotes from my informants. In my following analysis, I account for the way that digital spaces have generally reorganized social and professional life in America, charting them through their rapid evolution, while proposing that the tattoo industry is currently in a "digitization" period that, similar to its "artification" period in the 1990s (Kosut 2013), has overhauled the landscape of the industry. This digitization period is defined by the majority of tattoo marketing shifting to online spaces in which artists are heavily incentivized to become content creators, as well as a large amount of artist-client interactions being facilitated through digital platforms. I propose three categories of engagement among tattoo artists that capture different approaches modern tattoo artists have to balancing historical practices, subcultural identity, and the demands of the modern American market. Overall, this study argues that the current tattoo industry is

¹ A notable exception is William Force's "Tattooing in the Age of Instagram" (2020). Much of what I heard from my informants mirrored his ideas and his "virtual tattoo community" framework was helpful in conceptualizing this project.

undergoing an era of digitization that has been met with ambivalence by artists who must adapt to the ways it has restructured and reshaped the cultural meanings of their practice. It reflects the broader changes brought about by digitization on the relationship between the worker and the client, particularly in creative industries, such as tattooing, that rely on the cultivation of a personal brand and network of clients.

Methods

This study was conducted using a mixed-method grounded theory approach to ethnographic research utilizing a combination of field observation and semi-structured interviews with tattoo artists in Asheville, NC, and Glen Burnie, MD, with the primary research period spanning January to August 2025. The majority of participants were recruited through direct contact; this took the form of selecting a tattoo shop to enter and observe for several hours, during which I would inform the working tattoo artists or any managerial staff present of my research and ask for consent to use data collected from them in this study. I presented my research project to potential informants as an exploration of the current tattoo industry using the perspectives and experiences of tattoo professionals as my primary data source. All data presented in this paper was observed, included and analyzed with consent. It was important that during this observation process I did not stall or otherwise negatively affect the shops' business, so interactions with clientele were infrequent. I would approach artists between sessions for a brief interview, either in the moment or at a later scheduled time. Initial attempts to formally schedule interviews via email or phone had proven ineffective and were often poorly received. Many tattoo artists hold a subcultural attitude toward their practice, which, as I would learn, was best matched with this relatively informal, spontaneous method of recruitment. I, the researcher, am an early-twenties undergraduate researcher that is lightly, but not visibly, tattooed; some informants were surprised to learn I was tattooed at all. This meant I was largely unable to leverage my identity to secure interviews and instead relied on a relaxed, non-academic affect to build rapport.

I was primarily interested in observing the role that social media and digital spaces generally played in the everyday business and social practices of tattoo artists within a shop environment. Across shops, I noted the recurring discussions of how a certain tattoo may look when posted on social media, the best practices in photographing and posting tattoos, referencing other artists through their Instagram handle and in turn discussing their profiles, use of social media during down time, and use of online scheduling software. In interviews, I focused on capturing my interviewees' experiences throughout their careers, particularly concentrating on how the tattoo industry has changed over the years and how social media has been involved. In line with my informal approach to recruitment,

these interviews were guided heavily by the interviewee and relied primarily on follow-up questions, with the following questions acting as a general outline: *When did you begin tattooing? What brought you to the practice? Describe your career path to me. How has the tattoo industry changed since you began your career? What caused that, in your opinion? Is there a “tattoo community” or a “tattoo culture”? What does that look like? How do you find and book clients? How do you use technology/digital platforms/social media in your everyday business practices? How are these things used by other tattoo artists? How do you think the internet has changed the industry?* In Asheville, nine shops were observed, with no repeat visits, and five spontaneous interviews were conducted during these observations. In Glen Burnie, five shops were observed, including several repeat visits, and two spontaneous interviews were conducted. Each observation period lasted 3 to 4 hours for an approximate total of seventy-five hours of ethnographic engagement. The majority of non-spontaneous interviews were scheduled during these observations due to participant unavailability at the time of the initial visit, with two being scheduled and conducted in Asheville and four in Glen Burnie. This totaled observation of 14 different tattoo shops and the conduct of 13 semi-structured interviews among 18 tattoo professionals. Eight of these interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

In addition to my fieldwork, I used historical analysis and social media analysis to characterize the tattoo industry, with a specific focus on the role and perceptions of tattoo artists over time. Historical analysis consisted of a literature review on the history of tattooing within the United States, focusing particularly on the practice’s popularization over the last century and its effect on the tattoo industry. This included both peer-reviewed literature and public websites dedicated to preserving and recounting tattoo history. This was complemented by oral histories provided by tattoo artists during their interviews. Social media analysis consisted of monitoring and cataloguing the Instagram profiles of artists who contributed to this research as well as observing general sentiments circulating amongst the tattooing community on Instagram by reading posts and viewing short-form videos made by tattoo artists. This analysis focused on the digital interactions tattoo artists had with other members of the community as well as how social media was used as a marketing platform. These observations were complemented by the experiences relayed to me during interviews. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded in order to identify themes which were then supplemented through these further analyses. In the organization and theory-crafting portion of this research, lengthy discussions with peers were helpful to develop my ideas as well as identify themes, ideas, and details that I had missed or discounted. In order to describe and report my data, pieces of transcripts, field notes, and further analytical writing were grouped according to themes such as cultural loss, knowledge transfer, professionalism, industry restructuring, and marketing strategies and analyzed within those groups. The experiences of interviewed tattoo artists were then

analyzed individually in order to understand the ways in which the industry is navigated by singular actors.

History

A long study of the subject in other parts of the world discloses the fact that tattooing was and is in so many countries much more common than is supposed; indeed it is often universal...

(Sinclair 1909:399)

Chronicling tattoo history is as intimidating a feat as chronicling the history of fabric arts, pottery, or makeup artistry; for as long as humans have been able to, they've been skillfully manipulating ink, wool, clay, and pigments into meaningful, but somewhat temporary, expressions of their cultural and individual identities. However, understanding the history of tattooing as a cultural taboo, phenomenon, and industry is crucial to understanding the state of the modern tattoo industry. In recent decades, the practice's working class and subcultural roots have been intentionally hidden from the general public; this erasure of early tattoo imagery and meaning in favor of a clean and respectable middle class aesthetic have been primarily perpetrated by popular print and television media (Kosut 2006:1043). This gradual shift in public perception about tattooing has elevated the practice into an art form, increasing its acceptability and respectability as well as sanctioning its popularity in the modern U.S. (Kosut 2006:1044). As I will expand upon below, having a tattoo has become less about rebelling and displaying group membership and more about aesthetic value and individual expression. However, to many tattoo artists and collectors, this gradual change continues to be a threat to tattoo culture and a dismissal of the rich history of tattoos.²

Early History

In 1769, shortly before the American War of Independence, British captain James Cook returned to England from a state-sponsored expedition to the Pacific Islands. He had recorded, and subsequently reported, several aspects of the indigenous cultures including their propensity for tattooing as a form of bodily ornamentation (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023:382). This report introduced tattoos to the European upper class which later induced a fad of prominent socialites and royalty getting ornamentally tattooed (Burns 2019:29). The practice of tattooing existed in the pre-contact period of North American history

² It is important to note that much of tattooing history has not been well documented and its legitimacy depends heavily on the perspective of the documenter. I have investigated any facts that I reasonably could.

among indigenous populations, as was noted by explorers and colonists in post-contact reports (Sinclair 1909).

During the initial colonization of North America, indigenous perspectives and practices were systematically discounted and wiped out, including ornamental and potentially spiritual practices such as tattooing (Sinclair 1909).³ Where British nobility viewed indigenous tattoos as an aesthetic feature to be co-opted or mimicked, British colonists disavowed tattooing entirely. In the North American colonies, practices associated with the indigenous populations were condemned as uncivilized and barbaric and so people that cared about their reputation and wanted to distinguish themselves from the “less-thans” avoided them altogether. This is a foundational reason for the low-class status of tattooing in early United States history.

Although it is not well documented, many contemporary artists I interviewed suggested that indigenous culture remains influential in North American tattooing because its colonial history is shorter than that of other continents. Xeu Leite, an eccentric cosmopolitan tattoo artist with 25 years of experience, called upon the rich history of native tattoos to explain her anti-colonial beliefs about the modern industry. She connected the continual presence of tribal culture within North America to the relative acceptance of tattoos within the continent, particularly in Canada and the U.S., where she has worked. “This is also,” she explained to me, “why tribal and ornamental⁴ tattoos are popular in North America,” especially compared to other locations she’s tattooed in, like Hong Kong. Although I have not found sources on this topic to substantiate this, it is not unlikely; I have heard variations of this logic used by many other tattoo artists. The full influence of Native American tattooing on the modern industry is unfortunately outside the scope of this study.

It is, however, known that tattoos slowly started to gain popularity with the working class in the United States. In a practice that carried over from the initial British colonization, tattoos were used to mark prisoners and slaves and so, to the general public, became primarily associated with criminality (Sinclair 1909). However, tattoos slowly started to gain popularity with the working class in the United States as an embodied symbol of group membership or status; the practice became especially popular amongst military servicemembers due to their limited ability to express their identity otherwise (Kosut 2006). The practice spread slowly through a variety of American subcultures associated with the working class and tattooing technology slowly, and secretly, evolved through community connections. Tattooed bodies were often seen as spectacles rather

³ Despite this concerted effort, many indigenous tattooing practices have survived with their people, although are still heavily stigmatized; a notable example are modern Maori face tattoos.

⁴ These are the tattooing styles most associated with Indigenous cultures, especially in North America.

than as forms of self-expression, being secluded to carnivals and other “attractions.”⁵ Capitalizing on the increased popularity and demand of tattoos, Samuel O’Reilly, a former member of the Navy and convict, patented the first electric tattoo machine in 1891 (Tattoo Archive 2008; Burns 2019:29). This patent marks the beginning of the tattoo industry at large.

The growing popularity of tattoos sparked academic research into the topic, but much of this research was based on easily accessible subjects like prisoners and the institutionalized, reinforcing the criminal connotation of the practice (Burns 2019:31). These studies were, in bulk, conducted prior to mass incarceration within the United States, meaning that these subjects were representative of only a small portion of the wider U.S. population; early criminologists used this data to associate tattoos with hereditary criminality (Burns 2019:31). Despite the social and professional stigma associated with having a tattoo, they continued to spread amongst the consumer population in the U.S. Increasing demand led to further technological innovation in the practice, increasing the affordability of tattoos for the target working class populations.

Mid Twentieth Century

The transformation of tattoos from spectacle for the public to gawk at to commonly accepted forms of personal expression available to all began in the 1950s when the practice began to be associated with countercultures that made use of tattoos to display their group identity (Burns 2019:30). Tattoos quickly became an integral aesthetic feature of counterculture movements and groups, including punks, hippies, bikers, and gang members, who often displayed their loyalty to counterculture ideals through distinctive and visible tattoos (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023:383). As counterculture groups were still heavily associated with crime and delinquency, and tattoos were still prevalent within prison populations, tattooing was not able to shed its criminal reputation at this time. Increased visibility of tattoos and the practice of tattooing through their utilization by these marginalized groups led to the codification of anti-tattoo sentiments into state law when many U.S. states banned tattooing in the 1960s, citing health concerns (Kosut 2013:143).

These health concerns were not entirely fabricated. Tom Beasley (he/him) labelled most of the tattoo shops that existed when he began tattooing in 1974, 51 years ago, as “bucket shops.” “Basic sanitation meant nothing” back then, he explained to me, so tattooers would clean their tools – including their used needles – in just a bucket of water. They may even add “a few drops of Lysol, if you’re lucky,” according to Tom. This led to

⁵ This is not to say that tattooed persons viewed themselves purely as spectacle and did not have personal motivations for getting tattooed. As the specific history of tattooed people is tangential to this study; I am describing recorded public opinion.

tattoo clients contracting blood-borne illnesses from their tattooers' unsanitized needles; Hepatitis B was the major medical concern during the early- to mid-20th century. As demand for tattoos steadily increased, tattoo artists revised and improved their sanitation practices in order to attract these prospective clients. However, the industry as a whole would lack regulation or professional standards for sanitation until the early 90s.

Policy on tattoos rarely reflected the public's opinion on tattooing: even as some states were banning the practice, the 1960s ushered in a period known as the American "tattoo renaissance" (Burns 2019:31; Kosut 2013:142). It was characterized by technological, artistic, and social changes within both the tattoo industry and American society as a whole. During this renaissance, young people with an interest in fine art, including those with fine arts degrees, began to enter the profession alongside traditionally trained tattoo artists, slowly shifting the practice of tattooing from a pedestrian craft to an art form in the public eye (Burns 2019:31; Kosut 2013:142). These new artists were desperate for the legitimization of tattoo as both an art and a profession and pushed for increased professionalism in the industry in an attempt to shed the negative stigma associated with it (Force 2020:415). In doing this, some artists introduced new styles of tattoos that differed from traditional designs in an attempt to combat the association of tattoos with deviance (Burns 2019:32). The American tattoo renaissance marks tattoos entering the mainstream through media exposure pushed by this new wave of tattoo artists; Tom cited tattoo magazines on newsstands as being the way the majority of people became accustomed to tattoos, recounting a few magazines he had been featured in over the course of his career. These avenues no longer exist, he lamented, although he was indifferent as he explained that one of the major magazines had recently been revived.

Publication of tattoo magazines became more prevalent during the 80s and 90s, to the point that they could be classified in two different categories, "highbrow" and "lowbrow," reflecting the typical cultural categories in mass media studies (Burns 2019:33). Highbrow tattoo magazines often accentuated tattoo designs themselves, being oriented more towards an audience that appreciates the art of tattoo rather than the practice or culture. Lowbrow magazines, in contrast, were often positioned near pornographic magazines and convenience stores and accentuated tattoo culture and the bodies of the tattooed, particularly women. Tattoo culture began to fracture along these lines as art-based tattoo artists, often aligning themselves with "highbrow" culture, and craft-based tattooers, often describing themselves as "lowbrow," created separate spaces. Whether or not they were popular and long-lasting, tattoo magazines had a profound impact on tattoo culture and its status within mainstream culture since they were typically made by tattoo artists and wearers for tattoo artists and wearers and served as a semi-public forum for the tattoo community to develop delocalized tattoo culture (Burns 2019:33). After word-of-mouth,

the premiere marketing strategy in the tattoo industry, these magazines became the second-most important way for artists to gain publicity (Force 2020:423).

An obstacle to the mainstream acceptance of tattooing was its association with physically unsanitary conditions and high risks of infection. Sanitation and hygiene had been a trivial subject in the American tattoo industry for the majority of its existence, exemplified by traditional “bucket shops,” although they were beginning to be fewer in number compared to newer studio-style tattoo parlors. The AIDS epidemic, which began formally in 1981, was the catalyst for widespread sanitary change in the industry, with Tom recounting that it only became standard for tattoo artists to wear gloves while tattooing, a basic sanitation procedure, in 1983. Mick Michieli-Beasley (she/her, 40 years experience), who happens to be married to Tom, spearheaded the sanitation movement within the tattoo industry, beginning with her publication of an instructional workbook entitled “Preventing Disease Transmission in Tattooing” in 1989, and updated annually since. According to Tom, Mick was led to sanitation education by her deep love for the practice of tattooing and the growing scrutiny of the industry from the U.S. government. Many health departments, including the FDA, adopted the standards that Mick established. In 1992 she co-founded the Alliance of Professional Tattooists with Dr. Kris Sperry,⁶ a 501(c)(3) nonprofit providing sanitation education to her fellow tattoo artists, primarily through holding seminars at tattoo conventions, the main physical forum for tattoo culture.⁷ Mick’s impact on the modern industry can not be overstated.

It was not until the mid 1990s that tattooing was legalized across the U.S., with Tom recounting Massachusetts, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Indiana, and New York City proper being the last hold-outs for legalization, some holding out until the early 2000s. This increased safety and decreased stigma allowed for increased visibility of and access to tattooing, resulting in tattoos becoming more visible in popular media, particularly on the bodies of celebrities (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023:384). Now a feature of everyday life through mass media exposure, tattoos were transformed into a consumer product and publicly divorced from their associations with specific identity groups. Subcultural groups did not stop using tattoos as signifiers of group identity or cultural deviance, however; rather, popular media, such as mainstream art magazines and TV programming, became careful with the way they represented the practice by selectively choosing which tattooed bodies were presented, maintaining a working-class aesthetic while raising tattooing’s

⁶ Dr. Kris Sperry is a figure in tattoo history that was tangential to this research. He was a private forensic medicine and pathology assistant before serving as the chief medical examiner for the state government of Georgia. One of his scientific interests, according to a blog post he posted in 2019, is the use of tattoos in forensic identification.

⁷ It is notable that Mick and Tom left the Alliance in 1996 due to “many reasons,” with Tom implying that they had issues with the direction that the leadership was taking the nonprofit. The Alliance is still active as of writing.

mainstream status (Cordeiro and Parreira 2023:384). Increased respectability of tattooing as a practice and industry during the 1990s, termed by Mary Kosut as the “artification” of tattoo (2013), occurred through a complex mix of efforts by classically trained artists, professionalism and sanitation efforts by industry-developing tattooers, and capitalization on tattooing’s popularity and aesthetic by media companies (Burns 2019:34). This is the point at which tattoo culture began to truly fracture, with “tattoo art” and “tattoo artists” being subtly distinguished from “tattoo” and “tattooers” within the scene (Kosut 2013:142).

The Twenty-First Century

The turn of the present century marked the true introduction of tattoo culture on American television. Where tattoos had been shown in tangential media, like music videos and reality TV, now tattoo-focused shows such as *Miami Ink* (TLC 2005), *LA Ink* (TLC 2007), and *Inked* (A&E 2005) began to air, introducing the general public to the daily life of a tattoo shop (Burns 2019:34; Puc and Hall 2021). While tattoos themselves had become more acceptable and normal, the profession of tattooing retained its associations with social deviancy and criminality; this first wave of tattoo television worked to humanize and normalize it. The early 2010s saw an explosion of tattoo-focused reality shows, likely a result of the 2007-8 WGA strike that fundamentally changed American television and media in general, jumpstarting the trend of unscripted “reality” television that remains popular to this day. Some of the more notable shows from this era include *America’s Worst Tattoos* (TLC 2013), *Best Ink* (Oxygen 2012), *Tattoo Nightmares* (Spike TV 2012), *Bad Ink* (A&E 2013), *Tattoo Rescue* (Spike TV 2013), and the famous *Ink Master* (Spike TV 2012) (Puc and Hall 2021). It is notable that reality TV shows about tattooing shifted from dramatic narratives taking place within a tattoo shop involving tattoo artists to competitions focusing on the tattoos themselves with the lives of the tattoo artists, while still being the main on-screen talent, being de-emphasized in favor of showcasing the tattoos they produced. This suggests that audiences, after becoming acquainted with the concept of tattoo artists as regular workers, began to care more about what they produce, their art and tattoos, rather than their lives as workers. Many informants I spoke to mentioned shows unprompted – particularly *Ink Master* and *Miami Ink* – often speaking about them with a negative or critical tone; several remarked that the shows gave potential clients expectations about the price and speed of tattooing that day-to-day tattoo artists simply could not meet.

Regardless of tattoo artists’ opinions on these shows, it is undeniable that visibility of tattoo culture on television, a highly accessible form of media for most Americans, was one of the biggest influences in the shift of how mainstream culture views tattoos (Burns

2019:34). The commodification that followed this is most clearly demonstrated by the marketing of tattoo styles and imagery towards the youngest possible consumers with the rise in popularity of temporary tattoos and products such as *Tattoo Barbie* and *The Sesame Street Talent Show: Tattoo Tales*, a children's book that included a sleeve of temporary tattoos of popular characters from the show (Kosut 2006:1036). By 2013, there were 20,000 recorded tattoo shops in the U.S.,⁸ a far cry from the few-and-far-between nature of tattoo shops of the '70s that older informants described to me. Concurrent with the popularization and commodification of tattoos was the introduction of widespread internet use. Many tattoo shops, or independent artists, created websites to display digital portfolios and market their practice. In the 2000s and early 2010s, there were e-zines, forums, and other websites catered specifically to the body modification community, which were often moderated and operated by members of the community (Roberts 2016). This provided a digital meeting place based on either a love of the practice or a presence in the industry, allowing for delocalized personal communication and marketing as compared to curated magazines. While shop-specific websites are still commonplace, most online spaces dedicated to tattooing or body modification generally were abandoned by the community as the operators altered the sites to attract outsiders in an attempt to make the website sustainable (Roberts 2016).

Social media (hereinafter "SM") platforms, more technically referred to as social networking services, became novel social forums in the early-to-mid 2000s with the introduction of Myspace (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Reddit (2005), and Twitter (2006)⁹ and subsequently became a feature of daily social interaction with previous sites having regular updates and the launches of Instagram (2010), Pinterest (2010), Snapchat (2011), and TikTok (2017). Digital spaces like these were utilized by their parent companies as well as their users to market products and services. In particular, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest had, and currently have, robust image-sharing capabilities in which one or more images can be paired with a caption and reach a wide, delocalized audience, making them apt for product or service marketing. The popularization of digital cameras and the revolutionary inclusion of digital cameras within mobile phones allowed these image-sharing capabilities to be accessible to the general public.

Tattoo art, a visual and visceral medium, could now be easily photographed and posted online by tattoo artists in mere moments. Rather than taking pictures of finished tattoos with full-scale cameras and printing them to be compiled into a physical portfolio of work,

⁸ Since the tattoo industry is largely unregulated it is difficult to find reliable data on how many shops are open in the U.S. at any point in time. Other industries tend to be tracked through licensure, which is required for tattooing based on state or city regulation and therefore is inconsistent country-wide.

⁹ This list is representative but non-exhaustive. I have chosen to list SM that were discussed by informants during interviews and so many defunct SM are not included.

artists could post them online, allowing them to create and easily update a digital portfolio that doubles as a public advertisement for their practice (Force 2020:423). This is more prevalent on picture-focused social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, than on text-focused SM like Twitter, Myspace, and Reddit, although the recent boom in popularity of short video-focused SM like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels has expanded artists' use of those platforms. Due to the centering of photos with captions on Instagram and Facebook, those two SM have become the primary digital marketing tool of contemporary tattoo artists.

The internet age is an age of accessibility; one can open a search engine and search “local tattoo shops,” “famous tattoo parlors,” or even “cheap tattoos” and find dozens of shops marketing themselves. There is a consensus expressed by both informants in this project and in literature that tattoo artists maintaining an online presence, especially through Instagram, is the new normal for the industry and seemingly the only way that newer tattoo artists can become established (Force 2020:423). Clients are easily able to search SM for “tattoo” and find, or even simply scroll until they are algorithmically shown, hundreds of profiles and accounts of all skill and experience levels. It is also possible now to learn how to tattoo effectively by yourself from digital resources, as well as be able to buy the materials necessary to tattoo online without verification, separating the lineage, legacy, and underground aspect of tattoo culture from the modern industry and practice itself (Kosut 2013:149). Because contemporary tattoo artists can learn how to tattoo from temporally disconnected and impersonal training materials, many consider tattoo to be as flexible an art form as any other visual medium; post-modernist trends of disregarding the past or fundamentally altering the “rules” of an artistic practice have bled into tattooing, especially as increased accessibility has allowed tattoo artists lacking formal academic or informal apprenticeship training to enter the industry with unique artistic perspectives (Kosut 2013:149).¹⁰

Digital spaces are, of course, not the only reason why tattoo culture is changing. “My generation is slowly but surely dying,” Tom told me calmly in the middle of our interview, explaining that two of the “big guys in the business” had recently died within a few days of each other. He consistently mentioned two of the biggest tattoo artists in his generation, Lyle Tuttle and Ed Hardy, both of whom made strides to preserve and document tattoo history which Tom credits for the modern popularity of tattooing. Lyle Tuttle is deceased and Ed Hardy is currently retired from the industry and living with Alzheimer’s disease. Inevitable generational changes have degraded the old ways, aesthetic, and culture of tattooing as older generations of artists retire and swaths of newer generation artists enter the community with fresh, contemporary perspectives, redefining the industry as a whole.

¹⁰ This has led to the creation of several new styles of tattooing, like trash polka, watercolor, and ironic.

This, unfortunately, has led to older established tattoo artists feeling like cultural outsiders in the field that they fought tooth and nail to destigmatize, legitimize, and popularize, often expressing that tattoo culture or history is currently being “lost” (Kosut 2013:154).

Starting with indigenous American practices and shifting through subcultural groups to mainstream culture by avenues of circus performances, magazines, television, and most recently SM, the history of American tattooing has been fraught with change. Its working class and subcultural roots have been dampened in media surrounding the practice which has fundamentally redefined the culture, aided by the effort of some tattooists in the late twentieth century to elevate tattoo to an art form so as to increase its legitimacy and acceptability in daily life. The change to what tattoo culture is today clearly did not begin with the industry’s shift to twenty-first century digital marketing strategies but was undeniably exacerbated by the high visibility and near-total accessibility of the practice afforded by SM. The presence of tattooing on social media has made the act of marketing oneself as a tattoo artist more effective due to the high volume of consumers on social media platforms, increasing commodification and accelerating co-optation of tattoo by mainstream culture. Nearly all change in American tattoo culture has been due to a shift in either visibility or accessibility.

Digitization

Television and Early Internet

First it was television, it was *Miami Ink* and *Ink Master*. I think with those shows, it kind of brought [tattoo artists] out of the shadows, and it kind of made people be like, Oh, well, those people are pretty normal.

Cliff (he/him), shop manager/ex-artist

As tattoo-focused television shows became popular, their prevalence worked to humanize tattoo artistry through early reality shows, like *Miami Ink* and *Inked*, and redefine the industry with a consumerist tint through later competition shows like *Ink Master* and *Best Ink*. This mechanism is commonly mentioned in analyses of tattoo culture’s growth but is typically understated. Academic literature tends to mention these shows as evidence that tattooing broke into the mainstream but neglect the influence that these shows have had on the tattoo industry in the early twenty-first century. For example, in an interview-driven article that attempts to uncover the way that tattoo professionals define themselves (2018), Irmgard Steckdaub-Muller mentions television shows only once, briefly, as a way to explain how celebrity tattoo artists came to be (46). I found from my

interviews with tattoo artists that these shows had a much greater impact than has been considered by many scholars.

To my surprise, when asked about what caused tattoos to enter the mainstream many artists immediately brought up TV shows, particularly *Ink Master*.¹¹ The artists who had the most to say about these shows were those who had been tattooing for over a decade, many of whom entered the industry during the height of popularity of these shows (2007-2017). I suspect that younger artists, especially those who have entered the industry within the past five years, do not consider these shows to be particularly important as they were not prominent when they joined.¹²

Experienced artists spoke about tattoo-based TV shows with a primarily negative tone. Dane Mitchell (he/him), a shop owner and tattoo artist with twelve years of experience, told me that he was annoyed with the narrative that these shows set about what people thought they knew about tattooing. Due to the time constraints of these often forty-five minute to hour-long episodes, several tattoos were shown to be conceived, designed, and tattooed in unrealistically short amounts of time with little to no mention of pricing, as artists on shows like *Ink Master* do not make money from the tattoos they make during the competition. This means that some clients come in having seen these shows and expect huge pieces - sleeves, back pieces, face tattoos - to be designed and completed for them the same day, and at very little cost. "That's not how getting a tattoo works," Dane remarked bitterly, going on to complain about people who have pestered him about going on the show. Despite his distaste for them, he concluded his thoughts on these shows by acknowledging how they "pulled back the curtain" of the tattoo industry to the general public, allowing for its growth and his job security. They were fully pulled back, he and other tattoo artists expressed, by the internet.

As internet use became more accessible and commonplace in the early 2000s, some tattoo shops and artists began to take advantage of the new marketing opportunity, creating their own websites to attract clients or display their art. Professional websites did not, however, allow space for discussion or community building, so many tattoo artists began to use social websites like Myspace to not only show off or discuss their work but also to see and interact with other tattoo professionals. This desire for community led to the creation of several exclusive tattoo-centric websites explicitly for tattoo artists and

¹¹ I purposefully avoided leading informants by mentioning tattoo-centric television shows during interviews.

¹² *Ink Master* is still actively recording and releasing episodes as of the time of writing but has significantly decreased in popularity and therefore relevancy. After a brief cancellation from 2020-2022, the host and all judges were replaced after 13 seasons and the show is now available exclusively on the paid streaming service Paramount+, making the show significantly less accessible than the original broadcast had been.

enthusiasts to talk amongst themselves, including Ink Nation.¹³ Bill Smiles (he/him), a shop manager and tattoo artist with twenty-one years of experience, recounted his time on the site to me:

It used to be a tattooer-only site. It had, like, it was mostly tattooers. I think you had to either be a tattooer or somebody who collects tattoos, but you had to, like, be one or the other, but we could all talk to each other. It was similar to, like, Facebook and Myspace and whatnot, and it was really cool because, like, I met a lot of really cool tattooers that way when I was young and they, like, gave me advice and whatnot. That was, like, a big thing that doesn't exist anymore.

These dedicated websites and forums no longer have active userbases, even if they are still live sites.¹⁴ However, exclusive tattoo artist-based digital spaces housed within larger, general interest platforms still exist as professionals continue to seek out community, especially in times of hardship.

After describing Ink Nation, Bill went on to explain that during the COVID-19 pandemic, he and several other local tattoo artists created a closed group on Facebook, meaning that Facebook users would have to apply and be accepted to see discussions within the group. Facebook is particularly suited for hosting small exclusive communities due to these privacy settings. Due to the largely unregulated, yet semi-medical, nature of the tattoo industry, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic it was left to tattoo artists to decide the new health and safety standards of their practice, just as it was during the sanitation movement of the 1970s. Once the pandemic ended, the group remained active, being used to discuss problematic clients and sell their equipment to other professionals. It was especially helpful, Bill recounted, during the aftermath of Hurricane Helene's destruction of Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee, the region that the Facebook group was created for.

Although these modern digital spaces exist, the only informants that interacted or had knowledge of them were experienced tattoo artists like Dane and Bill. I suspect that this is due to the current reputation of Facebook amongst younger generations of being a website for middle-aged and older people, while considering apps like Instagram and TikTok to be

¹³ Other forums and body modification focused websites existed at the time, although it is difficult to find any concrete information about them. First, I have been unable to confirm the existence of Ink Nation. Derek Roberts studied (2014, 2016) a site he referred to as "ME", the anonymized name for an exclusive body modification forum, which I was unable to confirm the identity or existence of. I found a few Reddit threads referring to an "IAM" forum which similarly was an exclusive body modification forum attached to a public e-magazine which I was able to find sparse records of but have discussed briefly with a peer that was a member of the forum.

¹⁴ Or, at least, none of my informants mentioned active dedicated forum spaces and my internet searching yielded no active results (see previous footnote). I found several tattoo forums that were inactive, i.e., only had a handful of posts made over the course of the past few years with little to no interpersonal discussion.

not only more appropriate for themselves as well as their target audience. These apps do not have ingrained community-building features like Facebook, discouraging users from trying to build dedicated discussion spaces. Instead, these SM encourage maintaining individual profiles, marketing oneself, and appealing to a broad audience.

Social Media Platforms

When I first started, I didn't even have an Instagram. So literally the only Instagram account I've ever had, is, like, for my tattoos. I think I had a Facebook at the time, but like, Instagram was still, like, relatively new. At the time people were like, *Oh man, everyone's switching to Instagram* kind of thing. So that was my first social media, like, as a business.

Dane (he/him), shop owner and tattoo artist, 12 years' experience.

Many tattoo artists I spoke to describe themselves as reluctant users of social media platforms, feeling that they must have and keep up with at least an Instagram account to maintain their careers. Despite this, they revealed to me several aspects of SM that work in the favor of tattoo artists and the industry as a whole. Firstly, artists can share their designs and tattoos publicly, which allows other artists to draw inspiration from their colleagues and provides unlimited access to materials to practice. It also allows users, both artists and non-artists, to directly support and promote each other by following another's account or liking and sharing their posts, which provides an opportunity to professionally and personally network from any location. Tattoo clientele are able to research an artist's work without interacting with them socially by perusing their posts, allowing consumers to be more selective which decreases the amount of unsatisfied clients and bad tattoos produced. Clients are also able to book consultations and appointments virtually through SM, potentially increasing the rate at which tattoo artists get booked. Overall, it has streamlined the business and marketing aspects of the careers of tattoo artists. The tattoo industry's presence on SM has also greatly increased its mainstream visibility because of the ever-increasing portion of the general public that uses SM regularly.

This increased visibility and access to the work of tattoo artists is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it clearly allows novice and experienced tattoo artists alike to connect to each other and their clients as well as study others' styles and techniques; on the other, some people that see tattooing content on SM will be attracted to it and believe that they, with no experience, are able to tattoo. Jordan Kiser (she/her), a permanent make-

up artist¹⁵ of one year aiming to become a tattoo artist, shared the story of her first tattoo with me and her coworkers:

My first experience getting a tattoo was at 14 years old. Me and my cousin, we were upstairs in her bedroom, and we saw a[n Instagram] Reel, or something like that, of this lady who took a sewing needle, dipped it in pen ink, and tattooed herself. And we were like, well, we can do that. So we busted open a ballpoint pen, and we didn't want our moms to find it, so we tattooed the bottom of our feet. And luckily, we did it where, like, all the calluses and shit is cause we could just shave it off. But I could've died or something. I could've got sick.¹⁶

Jordan ended this story by expressing that this type of reaction to tattooing content isn't exclusive to uneducated teenagers but also occurs amongst full-grown adults. This is exacerbated by the ease at which tattooing equipment can be acquired these days, with many tattoo artists I interviewed directly bringing up that even they, as professionals, order materials off of public-facing marketplaces, specifically Amazon.¹⁷

Aside from the consideration of personal injury, this do-it-yourself attitude to tattooing is not necessarily harmful; in fact, it harkens back to the working-class roots of the practice when there was rarely such a thing as a “professional” tattoo artist. Although obviously dangerous to the individuals, non-professionals tattooing each other with the knowledge that they are novices is often a group-building exercise between small groups of people, especially those in subcultures that embrace DIY. The issue arises when unqualified people claim that they have enough tattooing experience to begin a career as a tattoo artist, misrepresenting their skill to their clients and typically undermining the professional tattoo industry as a whole with subpar tattoos. SM can work in these sub-professional tattooers' favor if they are skilled at it since a poor tattooing experience can be easily covered up by a well-taken and, perhaps, edited photo post on their account which will then attract more clients.

¹⁵ Permanent makeup is a specific type of cosmetic tattooing in which the client gets aesthetic features typically created with makeup (eyeliner, lip liner, freckles, contour) tattooed on themselves. It is typically taught through a short certification course but is largely unregulated. Jordan insisted that the majority of her clients are people with facial deformities or other conditions that alter their face, rather than just superficial women, which she expressed as a common stereotype.

¹⁶ This is not an uncommon first step into tattooing. I got my first tattoo when I was 15, done by a friend that bought ink and tattooing needles off of Amazon and smuggled them to school. Many of her other friends also graduated from high school sporting her very unskilled stick-and-pokes.

¹⁷ Pre-digitally, tattoo equipment was created by the artist, handed down from artist to artist, or sold by specific tattoo supplier companies that required the buyer to be a tattoo professional.

Playing The Game

There's this online aspect where I think you have to be, like, an influencer at the same time. I hate it. I don't want to be on the internet, but every time I... Dane calls it, like, shaking my ass for views, it fucking works!

Brody (he/him), tattoo apprentice, 1 year experience.

SM platforms, especially those that function primarily as mobile phone apps like Instagram and TikTok, are constantly being updated for a wide variety of reasons, including addition or removal of features and recommendation algorithm changes. All informants, no matter their opinion on or level of engagement with SM, freely expressed their thoughts on how it feels, or likely feels, to keep up with the frequent changes to the platforms their industry is inexorably tied to. While newer artists lack the perspective to directly compare the current SM landscape to the way it was in the past, artists that have been in the industry long enough to experience the changes first hand were able to describe them to me.

The primary difference these artists, Dane and Bill, identified between past and present Instagram¹⁸ was the amount of effort they have to put into marketing themselves. "It used to be really easy," Bill described, because posts from the people a user followed would be arranged chronologically on a user's timeline which allowed tattoo artists to control how often they appeared on their followers' main feed. Artists who didn't care to have that level of control, like Dane, were able to post whenever they wanted and still get plenty of views and likes from their followers:

Then, I would post a picture- I had, like, less followers and arguably, not as good artwork, talking from like, 10 years ago. I post something and get hundreds of likes on it, and [now I have] the same amount, if not more, followers, and I'll post something and get 20, 30 likes on it, and I'm like, the fuck?

What caused this to change, both artists declared, was the implementation of and subsequent changes to "the algorithm," an enigmatic but commonly used term for the internal processes by which a SM picks what content users see.¹⁹

¹⁸ During interviews, Instagram was often the "default" SM as it is the most relevant to these artists' current careers, but both Bill and Dane agreed that these changes were experienced across different platforms. This is particularly true of Facebook as both platforms have been owned by the same company, Meta, since 2012 and have experienced similar shifts.

¹⁹ "The algorithm" can refer to this process on any social media platform, although most of these processes are often collapsed into that single term. These decisions are typically based on what the platform predicts users will engage with, based on prior activity and popular opinion, as well as what will monetarily benefit the SM. The reasons for SM implementation of algorithms is outside of the scope of this paper.

In the early 2020s, distaste for “the algorithm” is often associated with the over implementation of artificial intelligence systems into everyday technology which causes users, especially professional users like tattoo artists, to approach the topic with an “us” (humans and artists) vs. “it” (AI and algorithms) mindset:

With a change in algorithms, you have to play a game against the algorithm or ride the algorithm wave and it can... it sucks. Now it's just like the internet, the AI decides, like, what people should see and what people shouldn't see. (Bill)

This statement summarizes the main frustration with the current industry that tattoo artists expressed to me during interviews regardless of their level of engagement with SM. They often simplified this concept as being forced to “play the game,” typically framing it as playing against the algorithm. Following the apt metaphor of marketing on social media being akin to playing a game, which multiple tattoo artists used to explain the idea to me,²⁰ I have termed the strategies that each individual tattoo artist uses when interacting with SM as being their “playstyle.” Due to the constantly updating nature of current SM, tattoo artists must also rapidly adjust their playstyle to enigmatic new algorithms without warning, which only deepens the “us” vs. “it” feeling.

A distaste for this system is seen especially in those who remember a time before it. This means that many older tattoo artists who have established careers largely ignore SM while many newer artists looking to become established spend far too much time on it. I saw this often when asking tattoo artists to interview for this research; in the beginning I would clearly state that I was looking into the connection between SM and the tattoo industry, which led to newer artists volunteering readily and experienced artists insisting they “don’t know anything about that.” When I began to position my research instead as being on the modern history of tattooing, older artists began to open up about their experiences which, despite their previous dismissal, heavily involved digital spaces and provided perspective necessary for me to briefly chronicle SM’s tattooing past and faithfully analyze SM’s current role in the industry. This dismissal of SM by experienced artists, and its opposite, sometimes reluctant, embracement by newer artists, serves to create a cultural schism within the tattoo industry based on playstyle which masquerades as a schism between younger and older generations.²¹

There are many different ways by which a professional user of SM can play the game but they overwhelmingly require paying consistent and close attention to one’s SM profile,

²⁰ As Dane succinctly put it: “It’s like a cat and mouse game you gotta fucking play.”

²¹ This takes the form of an age-divided narrative where older artists, resistant to change, don’t use social media to maintain the old-school ways of tattooing. Inversely, younger artists, excited by change, use social media obsessively and are “ruining” the industry by disrespecting the old-school ways. This narrative would be more accurate if based on playstyle rather than age, although the two are loosely connected for reasons explored later.

which isn't feasible for all working artists, especially not those unaccustomed to it. Tom, Dane, and Bill expressed they lacked the time that active playstyles²² demand. This may not be entirely because they are already established, however, as all three artists are also owners and/or managers of their own shop, which carries responsibility and a time commitment that less experienced artists do not have to manage. I must note here that artists in managerial positions were much more willing to be interviewed and speak on their experiences than non-managerial experienced artists who often expressed that they did not have the time, regardless of playstyle. Lacking the time to engage in SM actively is seen as a negative, as the cultivation of a SM account is seen as paramount to cultivating a client base and therefore succeeding in the modern tattoo industry. It follows that this matters much less to those who have already found success through a consistent client base. Tom Beasley does not bother with SM at all, nearly refusing to play the game; both the Instagram and Facebook pages for the shop he's owned for over five decades rarely post more than once a year, typically not about finished tattoos but rather the shop's anniversary or other sentimental events. Tom is in the unique position to be able to do this because his clients are nearly all repeat clients, meaning he has no need to connect to a novel audience to gain work. Dane and Bill do not have this luxury, as although they are in all respects successful tattoo artists, they do not have a solid client base and instead have to juggle SM, managing a shop, and tattooing at once. Notably, only tattooing actually generates money. Nonmanagerial artists also must account for the unpredictable and low-income nature of their work, often needing to hold two jobs even when having a steady stream of clients, decreasing the time they can devote to SM.

This distaste for SM expressed by experienced artists is not met with the wholesale acceptance of SM by newer artists, however. The perspective of the tattoo apprentices and non-established artists I interviewed (who had less than three years of tattooing experience)²³ revealed a wide range of opinions that, like those of the experienced artists, met at an understanding of SM's importance in the current industry. Some rejected and ignored it as much as they felt they could, where others embraced SM and viewed

²² By active playstyle, I mean being actively engaged with your SM presence. This can look like regularly posting both permanent and temporary posts advertising flash, posting tattoos consistently, posting skits or other personality-based content, answering direct messages, replying to comments, announcing available appointments, reaching out to other tattoo artists and shops, announcing sales or events, announcing guest spots, and more. An active playstyle is seen as the "correct" way of engaging with SM, as it is likely to boost your status in the algorithm, i.e., attracting more clients and building reputation.

²³ Notably, these artists began seriously pursuing a tattoo career after the quarantine measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, which generally accelerated the online democratization of information and digitization of a variety of industries. I stress this because these artists, regardless of previous experience as tattoo clients, began to professionally engage with the industry at a time of deep digital integration, normalizing it to an extent that likely would not have been present if this research had been conducted before 2020.

management of a professional digital profile as an essential part of building their career, most fell on the scale between the two.

Ray Stetina (he/they), a twenty-year-old tattoo apprentice in their early twenties with a little under a year of experience, explained their avoidance of uploading to SM as partially out of a lack of necessity in the shop they were apprenticing in:

I've seen several tattoo artists that get most of their [bookings] through Instagram, but that does seem to be more of the tattoo artists that aren't a street shop [like us]²⁴ ... If it's for a street shop, the social media, I think, is less important.

The other part, which Ray seemed more personally concerned about, was the possibility of their art being “scraped” from SM to be used in the large datasets necessary to train AI. They admitted that this decision to rarely engage with SM will likely harm their career when I asked if gaining SM skills would be helpful for them in the long term:

I think it'll definitely be valuable, especially since, you see, I want to do larger illustrative designs, and I also want to do cover-ups... For someone that's trying to market a very specific style, that's [social media] is where it is. I've not been posting nearly as much on Instagram, and don't have that big of a following, because I don't want my art being scraped.

In this, they identify a key aspect of why newer tattoo artists use social media, if even begrudgingly: right now, it's easier to make money with it than to try anything else. As an oversaturated market, tattoo artists must, to remain in business, find the easiest methods of ensuring profit, and in this moment of time that happens to be an active SM playstyle.

I stress the temporal aspect of this idea, that it is easiest *right now*, because that was stressed to me by both experienced artists, who I expected it from, and newer artists who I did not. Doe Bull (they/them), a tattoo artist with three years of experience and a semi-active SM presence, described to me:

I think if it [social media/Instagram] wasn't there, and it hasn't always been there, there's lots of other ways to market yourself. And because it's there, we use it, and it works well. But, you know, if it went away for whatever reason, there'd be no real issue. Yeah, I mean, it might have a little bit of effect. It's like the number one place I feel people go to find a tattoo artist, right now, but that doesn't mean that will change.

Although the tattoo industry has clearly integrated itself into the digital network that defines its digitization, the concept of tattoo culture as embodied through the industry remains distinct and nondigital in presence. Instead, the digitization of the tattoo industry

²⁴ A “street shop” is a shop that takes primarily walk-in appointments and is highly visible to the public, physically.

is simply a wide-spread adaptation that tattoo artists have made in the wake of the perceived and experienced dissolution of tattoo subculture as it becomes mainstream and the cultural symbol of a tattoo becomes commodified. Playstyles are simply the adaptation made by the individual artist as it comes to these digital spaces where they must “play the game.” If, theoretically, SM had not become the overbearing social and marketing forum it is now, the tattoo industry and the practice itself would clearly still exist, instead adapting to whatever influenced the market in that moment; if that influence was commodity-focused, the industry would likely be seen as losing its subcultural identity just the same as it is now.

Categories of Engagement

It is evident that the adaptations made by tattoo artists in the wake of the digitization of their industry vary widely from complete disconnection from SM to an intense interest in curating an online presence. From my observations, it is unclear whether there are meaningful connections between a tattoo artist’s SM playstyle and their level of cultural engagement, but there were clear correlations between general adaptations to the digitization of the industry and an artist’s engagement with the history of tattooing. This, then, becomes an aspect that heavily influences their SM playstyle. These categories do not describe these artists’ engagement with tattoo culture necessarily, simply its historical aspect, as all tattoo artists participate in tattoo culture by practicing tattooing. I propose three categories of engagement that have arisen due to the tattoo industry’s movement to digital spaces: disownment, participation, and conservation.²⁵

Disownment

The first category involves tattoo artists who engage with tattoo history through disowning it and who are, fundamentally, rebelling against the traditional methods and practices that define the trade for most. This can take the form of purposefully forgoing an apprenticeship in favor of self-teaching,²⁶ often using digital resources to do so, as well as

²⁵ I struggled with naming these categories, but ended up trying to capture the general attitude of the people with these perspectives. Disownment sounds intentional, rebellious, and yet still connected to tattoo culture through defining itself in opposition to it. Participation is neutral; this is the most diverse group and so their perspectives cannot be faithfully summarized. Conservation sounds respectful and deeply entwined with tattoo history, which is how these artists positioned themselves.

²⁶ Apprenticeships are the traditional way that knowledge gets passed down in the tattoo trade in which an aspiring artist approaches an established artist and asks for mentorship, with knowledge being heavily gatekept through this exclusive relationship. Through the democratization of tattoo knowledge due to the internet apprenticeships have become optional, as aspiring artists can learn entirely online.

creating controversial tattoos and/or SM content. They may choose to tattoo in unconventional or unprofessional locations rather than pay to rent a stall within a shop, instead directing clients to apartments, basements, hotel rooms, or rarely, public areas. This avoidance of traditional learning methods and choosing of unhygienic tattooing locations often leads to worse tattoo outcomes for clients, leading to many of these disowners being denigrated by others in the tattoo industry and often labelled as “scratchers,” a term connoting a bad tattoo artist.²⁷ Because of the way that tattoo culture is often underscored by community ties, and the general stigmatization of scratchers within it, disowners tend not to interact with non-disowner artists.

Due to their relative marginalization within the tattoo industry, as well as their lack of networks and tendency to avoid walk-in tattoo shops, I was unable to directly interview any artist I classify as having a disownment engagement style. These observations come from a combination of informant stories about artists within the industry and SM analysis; the speculative observations I will now describe come primarily from my impersonal SM analysis and therefore should be approached critically. Disowners do not seem to dislike the concept of tattooing within a shop itself but rather have a distaste for their identity being tied to a particular shop and therefore the broader tattoo community. This distaste is accommodated by the increasing presence of private tattoo studios and boutiques, where artists have little to no artistic oversight or long-term obligation to the studio. They often do not make their art in accordance with classing tattooing styles, largely ignoring tattoo convention in their designs; commonly those that engage in this manner are younger fine artists that prioritize the artistic or performance quality of tattooing rather than the technique. The effect of this on their SM playstyle will be discussed later.

A provocative example of this type of engagement, as described by Brody Bowen, an informant that I will detail shortly, was a relatively viral short-form vertical video. In this video,²⁸ a tattoo artist:

Put a [running tattoo] machine to a Roomba, and the Roomba would go around, and they'd like, run from it, and it [the needle] would like, hit them in their legs. And it's like, like, that blew the fuck up. So then he's professional now.

This video was clearly meant to be controversial and shocking, and if it was truly the reason that the artist was able to go professional, which I do not doubt, then it worked as intended. This emphasizes the performance art quality of tattooing, where the act of

²⁷ I want to make it clear that not all scratchers fall into this disownment engagement style, with some caring deeply for tattooing history, but rather that disowners are often classed as scratchers.

²⁸ While I am unsure if this is the exact video Brody is referencing, I was able to find a similar video on the Instagram profile “rixardtattoo” (posted May 21, 2020). His tattooing content is an informative example of the disownment engagement style’s manifestation online.

tattooing itself is the art; I find it unlikely anyone is impressed by the tattoo itself, the stray dots and lines on the client's legs.

Participation

The largest category, and perhaps the vaguest, is those that engage with tattoo history through participation. This is where the majority of tattoo artists land, including my informants in this research. If a tattoo artist has an appreciation or understanding of tattoo history but does not make a concerted effort to embrace it or rebel against it, they are simply participating in the current industry. This does not imply a passivity to change in the practice, industry, or culture, but rather describes an artist that embraces and interacts with the current scene of tattooing as it is. Participants can resist tradition or change, often by way of refusing to practice a particular style or use a certain technique or device, but ultimately their engagement with the past of the industry skews neutral. It is difficult to conjure an example of this type of engagement, but if you have any experience with tattoo artists from a shop that was not covered wall-to-wall in traditional flash, or alternatively completely bare of art, you have likely met a participant tattoo artist. They are likely to follow current industry trends, like adopting novel tattooing styles requested by clients and working in boutique-style shops, but also innovate to differentiate themselves from others within their industry. How this relates to their playstyle will be discussed later.

Conservation

The third category concerns those who care deeply about tattoo culture and the history of the industry, often incorporating it into their practice however they can; I have termed them conservationists. I admit that this type of engagement style was overrepresented among my interviewees: those interested in sharing tattooing history were understandably more likely to be willing to be interviewed. They strive to be both original and iterative, respecting tattoo culture and mythos while understanding that it is alive and needs to be added to. They have an appreciation for historically established styles, like American traditional, Japanese traditional, or tribal, and their designs often nod to specific notable tattoo artists like Sailor Jerry and Ed Hardy, if they do not directly reference their art. Conservationists do not necessarily restrict themselves to these legacy styles, however, appreciating or even pioneering new styles and techniques much like the tattooists before them.²⁹ They typically resent the cultural changes happening within tattooing, citing

²⁹ A notable example of this is the development of the neotraditional style of tattooing. It heavily borrows from the American traditional style by using bold black lines and classic imagery but deviates by using an expanded color palette and a variety of line weights.

declining apprenticeship rates and increasing acceptance of disowners as the major factors for what they perceive as the active decline of tattoo culture.

The informants that I would categorize as conservationists often had a deep personal connection with either the tattoo scene or tattoo history prior to becoming a tattoo artist, although not all that have a history like this engage with the history as conservationists. These connections are deeply varied and, in their variety, represent many aspects of tattooing history and culture. Tom Beasley, whom I have spoken about at length above, had lived in Japan as a youth due to his father's deployment to the country. There, he was exposed to the Japanese traditional style of tattooing which he subsequently fell in love with and has been practicing now for over five decades. An artist who chose to remain anonymous is the child of two notable tattoo artists and is the heir to their highly respected shop, considered to be the oldest tattoo shop in the city, and described being raised within an environment heavily connected to tattoo culture. I will now focus on one of my primary informants who began tattooing when he served in the U.S. Navy.

Brody Bowen (he/him) is an apprentice who had started tattooing a year before our interviews, only having been able to be in the shop consistently for the past six months due to his Navy service. He is a clear example of the conservationist engagement style I have detailed above. He was described by Dane, his mentor, as having:

A natural respect [for tattooing], and a natural like... he honestly probably knows more classic tattooers even than I do. Like, he can look at a piece of flash³⁰ and go, Oh, that's this guy's flash just off the top of his head, because he likes the history of what came before, which is very cool. That was a big deal [when deciding to mentor him]. You know, a lot of people nowadays don't give a shit. He even runs older machines, like coil machines.

Brody, who was sitting a few feet away finishing up a tattoo design on his iPad during this group interview, brushed this off: "I just wanna see how it's done." This would prove to be the reason for much of what he did artistically.

Brody began his artistic career in California, his home state, where he was studying studio art at a community college with the intention of pursuing a lucrative field like graphic design. During this time he was working as a bartender to make rent, which was rapidly increasing in the area due to the wildfires California is known for. When his workplace was shut down early into the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, he and his partner struggled to make ends meet. Since he was desperate for an option, and his family had previously been in the military, he decided to join the Navy to make the money they

³⁰"Flash" refers to tattoo designs that are pre-drawn by a tattoo artist, not necessarily the artist that will be tattooing it, and typically picked out of a book by clients. This is seen as the traditional method of running a tattoo shop, with custom work being a relatively new business model. This meant many notable tattoo artists, past and present, are known by the designs they sell to other artists, their flash.

needed. It was during his Navy service that he started noticing the “absolute dog water”³¹ tattoos that many others in the service had and decided he could do better.

The long history of tattooing within the Navy, and its popularity within current Navy culture, was likely the primary reason why these subpar tattoos stood out to Brody. He described the many reasons for this popularity to me comprehensively:

You can keep your career and get tattooed, and once the law lifted,³² they [Navy service members] had the security to be able to have that luxury of getting tattooed with a salary. And a lot of salary paying jobs do not have that. And within Navy culture, you don’t have a lot to express yourself outside of that uniform, other than tattoos. So you see a lot of the people get tattoos.

Brody described that many people would get whatever they could afford, including tattoos from their fellow sailors running tattoo machines in the less-than-hygienic barracks. Aided by his iPad, and the active COVID-19 quarantine that left him with “nothing to do but draw,” he began to explore and study sailor tattoo imagery. From there, he “got sucked down the rabbit hole of tattooing,” where he learned the rich history of the practice, especially as it exists within the Navy. After several years of studying designs and collecting many traditional tattoos across his body, he felt unsatisfied in the Navy, so as quarantine slowly lifted over the course of a couple years, he began to apprentice under Dane in Glen Burnie, MD, whenever his service would allow. After half a year of this often-interrupted apprenticeship, he left the Navy and began his apprenticeship full time. Brody shared the same sentiment I had heard from many artists during this research: “It’s a weird thing. People say tattoos find you. I don’t know that’s the truth, but like, it kind of felt like that.”

Through his inherent interest in art and his personal connection with the history of tattooing from his Navy service, Brody exemplifies the version of a conservationist actively entering the industry. His deep respect for the history and mystique of tattooing shocked me when I first spoke to him; a week before I met him, when interviewing his mentor, Dane, together with several of his coworkers, they mentioned him almost exclusively in relation to his SM playstyle and how he found success from it:

Jordan: You should definitely swing by and talk to Brody, because that kid and social media...

³¹ “Dog water” is slang meaning “bad,” but often with a childish connotation, as it is seen as an alternative to swearing. I think it’s important to not assume what exactly Brody meant here, and the phrase is funny to me.

³² He did not elaborate on what law he was referring to here, but there have been a series of laws over the past several decades dictating the tattoos that members of the military can have, usually excluding the heavily tattooed from upper-level positions. The Navy is known within the U.S. military as the least restrictive branch in this regard, but still has strict guidelines on sailors’ appearances.

Dane: He kind of gets it more. He's 30- he's 29 and I think he kind of like... gets it? And he doesn't also feel bad about like, making kissy faces at the camera and just being like, whatever, fuck it.

Throughout this conversation, they also described making skits for SM as “what Brody does.” This can be confirmed through a quick look at his Instagram or TikTok, where he clearly leans into the content creation and self-branding aspects of a digital marketing profile. Despite his mentor and coworkers’ praise at Brody’s ability to play the game, and his own admission that it works, he expressed to me:

I think the next few tattoos I’m doing is because of my TikTok. And I hate TikTok. I fucking hate making TikToks. I barely know how to do it, like... but... it’s really popular right now. I need to do it more. It’s- it’s hard. I don’t know if it’s hard or that I hate it, but-

To which Dane interrupted him to say: “Two things can be true.”

Brody’s commitment to conserving tattoo history and culture within his practice, including using older technology and studying historic techniques, while still engaging actively and effectively on SM may be surprising on its surface; since many artists in the industry, including Brody, believe that SM and the sheer accessibility of tattooing currently is leading to a decline in tattoo quality in the industry and perhaps tattoo culture itself,³³ it may be wondered why conservationists engage with it at all. As I stressed above, this is because in the current state of the industry SM is practically the only way to build a client base and be commercially successful as a tattoo artist. To pursue their interest in the culture and career in the industry, upcoming conservationists must adapt and market themselves within these digital spaces.

This is to say, there are conservationists that have heavily active SM playstyles, like Brody, and those that nearly avoid it, like Tom. There are disowners who make their primary form of art performance videos hosted on their social media, and those who will never make a “tattoo Instagram” at all. Participants can, in their vagueness, be at any point on this playstyle scale, but are likely to have a tattoo Instagram as is standard in the industry. My proposed engagement styles therefore do not predict or meaningfully correlate with SM playstyle, although they can clearly impact the type of content made by the artist. In a broad overgeneralization, conservationists may lean more towards making technical or factual content, participants towards regular skits or memes, and disowners towards provocative, disruptive, or controversial pieces.

³³ Nearly every tattoo artist I interviewed had different opinions on what *specifically* was leading to a decline, if they believed there was one. Only a few artists would give a definite answer as to if they felt tattoo culture was declining, but a near-universal dissatisfaction with the industry’s oversaturation and future were always underscored by reliance on or adoption of SM platforms.

These engagement styles allow tattoo artists to be organized based on their level of cultural involvement, as translated into engagement with the history of the tattoo industry. This is a more helpful way of thinking about the developing schism within the tattoo industry than basing it solely on age or playstyle. It allows the conflict to be framed as a concern over the loss of tattoo culture rather than a generational difference, as can be shown with young apprentice conservationists like Brody and the increasing level of people disowning the culture altogether. This is occurring in tandem with the mass commodification of cultural symbols, like tattoos, which inherently strip them from their cultural context for mass consumption through platforms like the internet; From the view of older artists, especially those that helped build the credibility and community of the industry as it exists today, tattoo culture is being attacked from both sides: many coming into the industry are generalized as apathetic to the history and culture, often producing bad quality tattoos, and the audience they must appeal to in order to stay afloat monetarily care less and less about the cultural significance of their work.

Conclusion

One of the long-standing theoretical hurdles found within public discourse and academic literature on tattoos is whether tattooing should be framed as an artform or a creative trade, with the ambiguity stemming from the history of tattooing itself. Some may argue that tattoos have always been art, since the artistic design element has been present from the beginning; others may argue that tattooing did not produce “tattoo art” until the 1990s artification movement developed that idea in popular culture (Kosut 2013). What this discourse reveals, ultimately, is the need for an expansive definition of art to include creative trades that may not always position themselves as art. To circumvent this debate, this piece has focused on the business and marketing aspects of a tattoo career rather than the artistic aspects of tattooing. In considering the perceived dissolution of tattoo culture, however, considering the tattoo itself, especially the tattoo-as-art, becomes necessary.

Although Walter Benjamin focuses on the reproduction of more classical artforms like stage plays and paintings, many of the ideas from his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* can be mapped onto the digitization of the tattoo industry, particularly since the 1990s “artification.” In this essay, Benjamin describes that pieces of art have an aura which encompasses the piece’s authenticity, its place in tradition, and I would add, the processes of its production and intended consumption ([1935]1969). His

argument is that the aura of art withers when it is mechanically reproduced³⁴ because that reproduction detaches the piece from its presence in time and space and the domain of its artform's tradition, substituting "a plurality of copies for a unique existence" ([1935]1969:4). In the case of tattoos in the digital age, the mechanical reproduction of a tattoo is the photo of it, likely posted on social media shortly after being snapped. A tattoo, which is influenced by and changes with the person that wears it, is then collapsed into its appearance at a single moment of time typically devoid of context; often tattoo artists take their pictures right after the process is finished, when the lines look the cleanest but the tattoo itself is at its most grotesque, wound-like state, as looking at any comparison of a tattoo day-of versus healed reveals.

A photo of a tattoo can never be an authentic tattoo, but it's also not trying to be. Unlike the reality television shows of the early 2000's which sought to reveal the authentic lives of tattoo artists, these photos are representations of an artist's work most often taken by, curated, and published by the artist themselves. The tattoo artist, in this way, is both the producer and reproducer of their own work. The responsibility of reproduction has fallen onto them, in which they not only have to design a tattoo and then physically tattoo it, but also photograph and disseminate it in order to find more clients. This pressure to find an audience to sustain their work on digital platforms is what leads to the development of playstyles. So, the aura of tattoos is not only being stripped from them by the way they are being experienced by the public, through collapsed and decontextualized photographs to be admired briefly, but also through the work required of the tattoo artists that produce them; as I heard during my shop observations, sometimes artists express their excitement to tattoo a specific design because of how it'll look online.

In this study I have argued that the American tattoo industry is actively undergoing an era of digitization that has reshaped the landscape of not only the industry, but also of tattoo culture itself. This is one of a series of major shifts within the tattoo industry as it gradually adapts to capture a larger, mainstream audience. Due to the movement of both the industry and the client base to online platforms as a part of this digitization, tattoo artists have increasing pressures to become content creators to become established at all, an often unwanted responsibility. Digitization has destabilized many aspects of the tattoo industry that are rooted in tattoo culture, such as its legitimacy as a trade and an art, the way that tattoo artists learn, and the way artists gain clients. Modern artists manage this destabilization through positioning themselves within tattoo history, as either a

³⁴ He is careful to separate this from general reproduction: "In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain" ([1935]1969:2). Mechanical reproduction instead refers to such things like films (reproducing stage plays) and prints (reproducing paintings) that fundamentally change the way the art is experienced.

conservationist, participant, or disowner, with the social media playstyles of members of these categories varying widely between each individual. Right now, tattoo artists are dealing with the tension between the fact that their craft is inherently embodied, ritualistic, and relational and that social media, the industry's primary marketing method, demands speed, mass appeal, and novelty over all else. They must adapt as their work gets stripped from its aura, nearly forced to take part themselves.

The modern tattoo industry is unique due to its product's inherent resistance against being a consumable commodity; a tattoo is non-returnable and, for the most part, permanently owned. Despite this, I can see further applications of these findings in studies of creative labor in digital economies, the commodification of cultural practices, and how subcultures adapt and persist under mainstream economic and social pressures. Exploring the way in which the introduction of digital spaces into the everyday lives of millions of consumers has affected subcultural trades like tattooing reveals how digitization forces creative producers to confront and adapt to the tension between their desire to produce and the demands of the platforms they rely on, restructuring the organization and cultural meanings of their practice itself.

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