Contemporary Tattoo and Social Media: A Special Relationship

Bruno Cordeiro(✉) 🄳 and Suzana Parreira 🄳

Faculdade de Belas-Artes, Centro de Investigação e de Estudos em Belas-Artes (CIEBA),
Universidade de Lisboa, Largo da Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes, 1249-058 Lisboa,
Portugal
`bruno.cordeiro91@gmail.com`

Abstract. Historically, tattoos have a negative connotation, being mainly associated with underground culture, while contemporary tattoos carry a different status, presenting themselves as culturally more open and professional. By distancing itself from the marginal phenomenon that characterized ancient tattoos and becoming a socially immersive medium, it is necessary to look at tattooing in the present from a different perspective in order to understand how the media are greatly responsible for this practice. Initially the mass media, mostly magazines and television channels such as MTV, and currently social digital platforms, both have enabled and promoted interaction between geographically distant people with common interests. Social media became popular for tattoo artists by bringing them closer to the public, making interaction and holding international conventions and meetings easier. Instagram is a network where it is easy to share the work done with a more diverse audience and has been one of the great drivers of contemporary tattoo. This paper looks for the relationship between tattoo and media and seeks to understand how Instagram has expanded the world of tattooing and allowed tattoo artists to get closer to the public by showing their work and being in contact with the audience.

Keywords: Tattoo History · Social Media · Instagram Tattoo Artists · Contemporary Tattoo

1 Contemporary Tattoo, Pop Culture and the Media

1.1 From an Underground Practice to a Mainstream Expression

Tattooing is an ancient practice, linked to rituals and cultures that assume different values and meanings throughout history. Currently, it is still a hermetic topic but its social perception has changed in recent decades. Despite its origins and cultural meanings, contemporary tattoo has reached a new dimension, now being more associated with aesthetics, the cult of the body, and the symbolic dimension that embodies identity and personal memories.

The act of tattooing consists of inserting ink into the skin, which crosses the first layer (epidermis) and lodges the pigment in the second layer (dermis). The technique's

origin is not precise, as there are traces of its presence in different cultures with no apparent relationship between each other [1].

Many tattoos produced today are influenced by cultural traditions from the indigenous communities of the Pacific Islands, as part of a ritual of transition to adulthood, as a form of joining a group and spiritual power. The first instruments used for tattooing were basic, such as thorns or pieces of bone, while their designs were simple geometric patterns, inspired by elements of nature such as plants, animals, waves, mountains and stars. The oldest records refer to Ancient Egypt, between 4000 and 2000 BC, and to the indigenous tribes of Polynesia, the Philippines, Indonesia and New Zealand [2] (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. A Māori chief with tattoos (*moko*) seen by James Cook and his crew (drawn by Sydney Parkinson, 1769), engraved for *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas* by Thomas Chambers.

In 1769, the British captain James Cook carried out a maritime expedition in the Pacific islands, in which he recorded an indigenous culture, and brought tattooing to Europe. Due to the influence of different religions and the colonization of the islands, tattoos took on a negative connotation and became mainly associated with criminality, sometimes used to mark prisoners or slaves. In 1827, in Japan, the traditional Japanese

tattoo (also known as *Irezumi*) showed bright colors and large dimensions, focused on a central figure, inspired by myths and monsters, with exaggerated details and surrounded by natural elements, such as clouds and waves. This style is mostly associated with the Yakuza gang, reinforcing the underground nature of the practice as part of a certain subculture [1]. In the United States, the traditional American tattoo was mainly used by sailors. In 1891, the American Samuel O'Reilly created the electric tattoo machine that revolutionized the way of tattooing, making this process much faster to perform [2, 3]. Tattoo artists quickly covered the bodies of sailors, turning them into circus attractions, which, due to the strangeness of their appearance, aroused interest in the public. The style grows to be known as traditional American and consists of icons with bold outlines, bright colors and black shadows. Symbols tattooed by sailors for centuries continue to be inspirational and used today [4]. With the invention of the machine, tattooing became accessible to a wider audience. On one hand, while it became popular, on the other, a wave of exaggerated exoticism was generated, with all kinds of people (men, women, couples, families) completely tattooed, exhibiting their naked bodies in circuses and fairs. The tattoo continues to be a marginal class symbol, with prisoners tattooing themselves with signs that represent the type of crime and the time in prison [4] (Figs. 2 and 3).

Fig. 2. Tattoo Design with a Naval Theme, circa 1900–1945, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 3. Mrs. M. Stevens Wagner with arms and chest covered in tattoos, 1907. The Plaza Gallery, Los Angeles, California (right).

In the 1950's and 1960's, there was a major transformation in the tattoo consumer public, now associated with individuals from counterculture movements: gangs, hippies and punks had a distinctive style (also) determined by their tattoos [5]. In this sense, tattoos reveal a symbolic potential of social revolt, resistance, freedom and individualization; those who have them show a clear intention of defying norms and asserting control of their body in society, namely more vulnerable groups, regarding family, school and

church. These movements' followers claim a new way of life, in which the body and sexuality must be lived more freely and far from capitalist ideologies [6].

The rise of tattooing in popular culture is now recognized as mainstream, being present in the entertainment and advertising industry. The approval and admiration of tattooed public figures is an incentive for those who idolize them to follow in their footsteps [7]. In the end of the 20th century, tattoos' presence in the mass media caused changes in social paradigms by transforming it into a consumer product and a daily practice regardless of age, class or ethnicity, distancing it from patterns and associations with specific identity groups. However, patterns related to the subcultures still exist, but the media have become more careful with their communication, thus raising the practice's status. Furthermore, the irreverence of the tattoo is also used as a communication asset in advertising, consequently making it a mainstream consumer product and something desirable by all social classes.

1.2   The Media's Role in Contemporary Tattoo

Tattooing is one of the oldest artistic expressions in the world, whose presence has been recorded on all continents and has been reinvented countless times throughout history. In the middle of the 20th century, tattoos were a characteristic symbol of individuals in counterculture movements: gangs, hippie and punk movements' followers distinguished themselves by style and tattoos, affirming political, ethical and aesthetic ideologies, contrary to the social norm at the time [6]. The media created a narrative regarding tattoos that changed the way people accepted the fenomen and connected with this personal expression: "If you turn on your television, open a magazine, or go see a movie, you will likely encounter a tattooed body. Actors, models, musicians, and idolized athletes proudly herald the mainstreaming of a previously marginalized and historically underground practice" [7] (p. 1035). Tattoo's visibility increased in 1981 with the rise of MTV and the influence of rock music. Unlike mass-produced products, tattoos are individualized and personal, the result of a creative process shared between tattoo artists and tattooed, which is complex due to simultaneous events, both ritualistic, economic, consumerist and individualistic. This process stems from the search for unique, visually and socially attractive creations [7, 8].

Tattoos result from sketches, arrangements and ideas that clients describe and design together with the tattoo artist. These ideas can be pre-conceived or customized images, created from the concept described by the client. Tattooing as an artistic expression has the potential to provoke fascination or revulsion in those who observe it, and this generates different ways of interpreting and communicating [9]. Television shows like *Miami Ink* and later *LA Ink* and *NY Ink* brought people closer to the reality of tattooing. These and other similar programs showed a more intimate and realistic dimension about the tattooing process, the personal meaning that tattoos can convey, its proximity to art and individualism for unique creation, far from pre-established prejudices related to the underground [10, 11].

The media has influenced tattoo's culture and has been crucial to change perception and social acceptance. Although there is no conscient intention of the media to change this perception, the growing exposure of the practice has been fundamental to normalize and raise awareness. Because society is interested in knowing more about tattoos, by

providing this information in a certain way, the media manipulates perception. When a new concept of tattooed people emerges, it does not mean that the associated subcultures cease to exist, it's just that the middle-class individual simply becomes the focus [12]. Likewise, through the media and with new technologies, tattoo artists reinvent the way they relate to the market, using different means of disseminating their work, from magazines, social networks (for example, Facebook, Instagram), reality shows to national and international conventions [3]. Wymann suggests moving away from questions about what tattooing is, in terms of materials used or who is practicing it, to focus on the way it communicates, referring that tattooing is conceived as a means of communication through which different ways of communicating arise [9].

Currently, millions of people around the world use digital platforms to create and share sophisticated cultural artifacts [17]. In the last decade, social media platforms have proliferated in contemporary society and have changed the way people interact socially at an informal and at a professional level. The rapid growth of social media requires an adaptation to a new reality, where the distribution of information, news and entertainment is no longer exclusive to traditional means of communication (mass media). Social media applications are based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of content between users [14]. The Internet and social media have alleviated geographical and chronological barriers, enabling the most isolated communities to be connected with the world, allowing them to keep in touch with friends and family or associate with other users [15].

With the presence of tattoo artists on social media (for example, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram), it became easier to show their work and reach a larger audience. The connection between professionals from all over the world makes room for conventions and meetings on a world scale, which results in the internationalization of tattoo artists. Due to easy access to content and a bigger visibility that the digital platforms allows, many tattoo artists limit themselves to copying and reproducing works, leaving new creations aside [16].

Instagram: How Social Media Created a Special Relationship Between the Public and Tattoo Artists The emergence of Instagram boosted the world of tattoos, an example being the United States, where the number of tattooed Americans has almost doubled in recent years. Individuals want to express themselves, they want to make a difference and the tattoo represents this act of individual affirmation [11].

Founded in 2010, Instagram's main goal is to share images and it became one of the most popular social media applications, with more than 500 million registered users in 2016. The success is explained by how easily it became possible to share photographs, with the use of filters giving users the ability to take pictures and make them visually interesting [13]. Platforms like this are constantly changing; they grow, improve and adapt to users, follow the evolution of cameras and mobile phones, offer new resources and this is reflected in the aesthetics of the images. One restriction is the fact that it is only possible to publish via smartphone, however, it allows instant sharing in other places, such as Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare. Captions, image hashtags and identification of other people by username can be used, as the essence of the platform is simple and combines several activities in a single structure. There are different types of users for which care and concern for aesthetics differ. A significant number of people are

concerned with aesthetics and apply specific visual styles, in a sophisticated and subtle way, in order to define their identity and give a professional look, aimed at a specific niche [13, 17, 18].

The evolution of cameras and technology has contributed to a better visual performance on the platform. With the possibility of importing content to mobile phones, many users choose to shoot and film using professional cameras that offer better image quality. The same goes for its treatment, as the use of image editing software allows you to go beyond the filters available on Instagram. Some users have a greater aesthetic concern, which is technically reflected in terms of design and photography. Certain users develop their own style and for that a distinct but consistent appearance is expected. Although the contents are about everyday life, their projection and sharing is not done arbitrarily. Some users opt for a minimalist version, others use local contemporary aesthetics as a reference and others mix different versions in their content. In general, shared artifacts can be more or less realistic, more or less elaborated, depending on the objective. It should be noted that the available tools allow all kinds of results, but the success of a given profile boils down to the consistency with which the contents are shared [13].

Thelander & Cassinger [18] define two types of users: *Instagrammers* and *Professionals.* The first type are experienced social media users, usually with more than one account, both for private and professional use. These users favor smartphones to photograph and prioritize the filters available on social media, as their goal is not to capture technically perfect photos but to register the moment and connect with the viewers. The focus of *Instagrammers* is to gain followers and "likes", so they follow some strict communication strategies and objectives, such as sharing current, daily and constant content, as well as the use of hashtags. Thus, feedback is seen as important, which leads to frequent accounts checking, in order to understand the success of their images. The "likes" and the number of followers are seen as a reward and as such, even if this type of user does not prioritize editing photographs, the photos and contents have to be thought out in order to captivate and attract more followers. This situation creates a paradox because users want to show naturalness and spontaneity, but at the same time they intend to reach more people, so they have to offer what the public expects to see. Professional users, on the other hand, circumvent the limitations of smartphones and Instagram, using professional cameras and suitable editing programs. All content published is carefully curated, they don't value the date the photograph is taken, nor the constant need to publish—their content is planned and treated as if it were part of an exhibition. These users create their hashtags, aiming to develop their own concepts, to explore the media and their own possibilities: "likes" are a bonus and not a priority, as these users' ambition is to explore the platform limits.

Due to its rapid growth, Instagram has also become an important commercial medium, where micro and macro companies create profiles to promote their brand, products or services. Social media enabled greater proximity and interaction between people and this forced advertising to adapt. Instagram allowed companies to get closer to users, communicate with them quickly and directly, through storytelling, publications and hashtags. The use of hashtags has become essential, as it allows for content to be filtered and dedicated search to a specific interest [19]. With this proximity, organizations are able to present a more personal side of the brand and convey a more honest image, thus strengthening the bond with the public. However, this proximity requires

organizations to be more careful in direct communication, as a negative experience on the part of a customer spreads more easily than in traditional media [15].

In order to understand how Instagram boosted and transformed the conventional way tattoo artists exhibit their work, Force [20] developed an exploratory study that showed Instagram is a visual content platform, and tattoo artists need to pay special attention to how they share images, namely color treatment and visual consistency. Unlike other media, old and new, Instagram has become an easily accessible and free advertising medium for tattoo artists. Nevertheless, the artist's signature and style impacts the way the public perceives the work, as more authorial tattoos tend to create a dedicated audience and attract followers that identify with the style (Fig. 4).
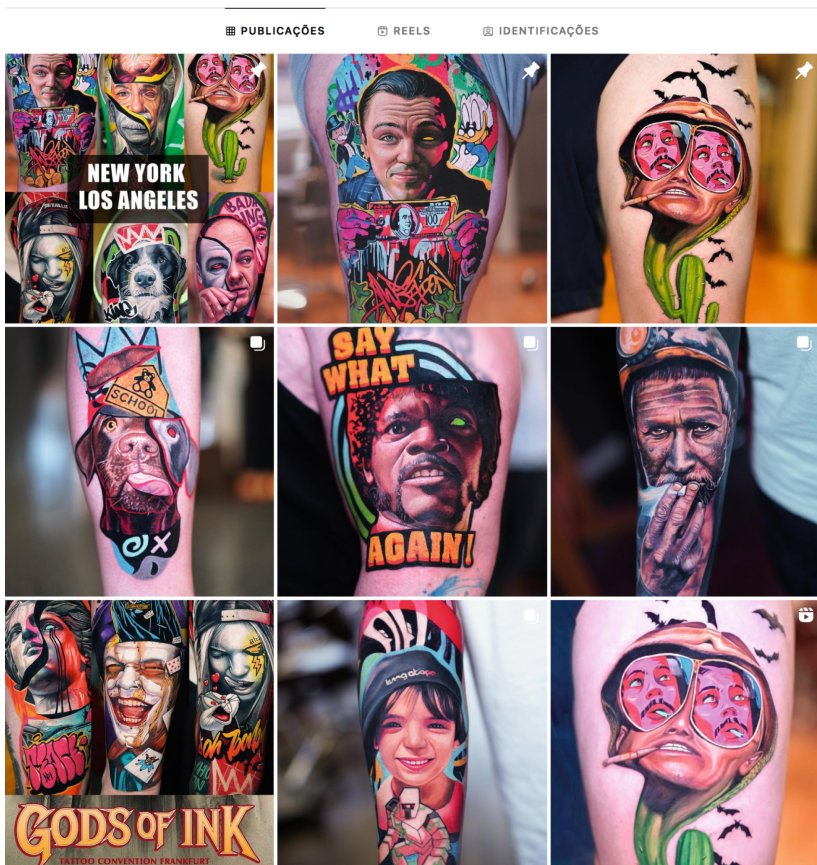

Fig. 4. Instagram's tattoo artist Dave Paulo (https://www.instagram.com/davepaulo_tattooartist)

Despite maintaining conventional physical media, tattoo artists are giving more and more importance to their digital portfolio, as it allows them to reach people more quickly and also share flashes (that is, designs available to be tattooed). These designs give tattoo artists the possibility of building an audience around a particular style of their

preference, therefore expressing their individuality as artists. Contrary to old media, Instagram has become an easily accessible and free advertising medium, which allows all types of artists, more or less reputable, to create and promote their brand identity. Many artists and studios have store managers who liaise with the customer, however, instagram allows all artists to create and promote their identity autonomously. Nevertheless, this management requires an extra and more intensive effort on the part of tattoo artists, so that their Instagram account can be seen as a portfolio. Tattoo artists, by being present in the digital world, make their work extend outside the studio, so their success and notoriety are also conditioned by the way their image is worked on social media. The tattoo is no longer just an artifact that the customer acquires, it now becomes a vehicle for interaction and sharing in the digital environment [20].

Conclusions

At the end of the 20th century, tattoos became popular with a broader public as the influence of the digital media increased. The growth of tattooing has been continuous until today with more and more people willing to get tattooed, regardless of social status or age, and more artists with diverse styles and influences are emerging, using more technology and better quality materials, with more hygienic standards. Contemporary tattoo results from a shared co-authorship between the client and the tattoo artist, as the client can grant greater or lesser creative freedom, although in most cases the choice of the tattoo artist is already made depending on the style that (s)he produces regularly [21].

Due to the media presence and easy access to information, tattoo artists can be inspired by other tattoos, drawings, illustrations or photographs, combining their technical, creative and authorial capacity. The more authorial and consistent the work of the tattoo artist, the greater their recognition and visibility especially if presented to a broader audience and communicated successfully. Tattoo artists' digital portfolio is becoming more relevant, easily reaching people willing to be tattooed and those who are changing their minds regarding this practice. Building an audience is part of a signature style, usually followed by a large group of people which marks the artist's individuality, transforming their work and bringing it to a new level.

As a main influencer in tattoo current status, social media appearance promoted significant change in the practice's social perception and, consequently, in contemporary popular culture at large. Thanks to a strong digital presence, tattoo artists work for a vast audience and contribute to eliminating negative stereotypes regarding tattoos.

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