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Professional identities in a changing world, life narratives from  
tattoo artists in The Netherlands

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## Professional identities in a changing world, life narratives from tattoo artists in The Netherlands

### Abstract

The tattoo world has seen dramatic changes in the last 30 years. Amid other phenomena, the popularization of tattoos between middle class workers and new mainstream aesthetics revolving tattooed bodies have helped to clean that stigmatized label that tattooing had as an illegitimate craft. Tattooers traditionally learnt the profession by means of apprenticeships where technical knowledge was acquired by the interaction with experienced and established tattooers tutors. Moreover, during the apprenticeships the tattooers internalized a relatively homogenous set of norms and values. Nonetheless, the times have changed, people learn and work in different ways. Besides, the inclusion of women and other genders into the field has created numerous variations on the tattooing conventions. This study delves into narratives from tattooers residing in The Netherlands to understand what influence the creation of professional identities. For that purpose, I carefully gathered the testimonies of a diverse group of tattoo artists from different backgrounds, experience and styles. During the interviews I inquired about the experiences of the tattooers embedded in a consumer-producer dichotomy. This means, the processes of being and doing translated into the experiences of being tattooed and tattooing others. Therefore, observing changes in the behaviour of the subjects across their experience, from the first to the last tattoo. The literature review elucidated that academics have ignored the relationship of this consumer-producer dichotomy in identity construction investigation. In that sense, tattooers are used as an example to explore new research perspectives that are not limited to the field of body practices. Nonetheless, more appropriate to understand divergent cultural groups and professions.

Three themes came out of analysing tattooer narratives. Firstly, the socialization practices, understood as how the practitioner deal with the numerous norms and values of the tattoo world. For instance, what is the role of aesthetics in tattooers identities. Secondly, the importance of the learning process as career path developer and builder of normative behaviours. I explore how different ways of learning the practice of tattooing and its relationships with tattoo conventions. Finally, the influence of gender identities and the contestation of gender stereotypes in a field that was considered as traditionally masculine.

Keywords: Professional identity, tattoo craft, gender, career development, consumer-producer dichotomy

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This particular paper has been quite the challenge. However, it is the culmination of a long process of dedication and days of readings and analysis. The subject it is something that has been making me passionate for a few years already. The fact that research is heading towards other forms of art such as tattooing makes me happy and excited. I would like to express how grateful I am with all those friends and family that always had a word of support. Their trust gave me the necessary energy to continue working and improving. Furthermore, a special thanks to all the artists that participated in this research. All of you have provide with important insights, and meaningful memories. I felt welcomed in all of the studios and spaces I visited. This study could not have been finished without your prompt cooperation. Finally, a particular recognition to my supervisor to help me find some light in a sea of ideas.

## 1. Introduction

The practice of tattooing has been encountered in different cultures around the world, for instance, the Māori and the Samoan. The way they assigned significance and social status to the tattoos might be an indication that humans are not only social but also semiotic beings. Therefore, we found in our bodies a medium to resolve the need to communicate and understand others. Tattoos have been used to transmit messages to our environment about what we are, what we do and what we like. In western societies, social groups such as bikers, sailors, barbers and gang members used tattoos as a badges of group affiliation. This had as a consequence the stigmatization of tattoo practices and its practitioners. Nowadays, we are experiencing the second wave of the Tattoo Renaissance, a time where tattoos are increasingly popular. The main characteristics of this time are the legitimation of tattoo aesthetics (Weiler et Jacobson, 2021), the contestation of traditional gender stereotypes (Botz-Bornstein, 2013) and the increasing and diversified tattoo offer (Mabry, 2021). Even though such developments prove an advance in the popularization of tattoo practices, the impact on the tattooers professional identities remain unclear.

Professional identities refers to the way to be and do in the workplace, and it is usually influenced by personal and professional experiences (Caza et Creary, 2016). Previous research has defined frameworks to understand how professional identity is affected by organizational policies (Paquette, 2012). Besides, how socialization adds features to construct professional identities in different working fields (Tomo, 2019). Research in the tattoo world has proved the existence of a relation between gender discrimination towards women and their difficulties on building strong tattooer identities (Almeida et al, 2020). Furthermore, the ethnographic work of Mabry (2021) explored the dynamics of a tattoo shop by illustrating the relationship of the tattooers with their learning process, the interaction with peers and the conventions of the tattoo world. However, the dichotomy consumer-producer in which tattooers are embedded has not been explored yet. This approach is observed as relevant, specially for divergent groups where identities are strongly linked to an specific cultural product. For instance, content creators, musicians or even *maverick* artists. This personal research takes into account the testimonies of a diverse group of tattooers residing in The Netherlands. The objective is to observe how the intersection between personal and professional experiences form their identity. Therefore, the research question proposed is:

“ How tattooers in The Netherlands build their professional identities based on their experiences of tattooing and being tattooed?”

Thus, the use of semi structured in-depth interviews was selected for the collection of the data. Here the subjects reflected upon several conventions of the tattoo practices and social stereotypes with a strong gender connotation. The sample consisted of 16 tattooers with different backgrounds and experiences. Besides, this study presents a diversified sample in terms of gender, which includes queer artists. The methodology used is a thematic analysis of narratives. Here, 3 main categories come together to explain the main concept of professional identity in the tattoo craft. The results mainly point out that changes in how tattooers are learning the craft may have a negative impact on the traditional conventions of the tattoo practices. Furthermore, tattooers and their aesthetics are turning into the display of individual tastes which are not always intermingled with their productions. Plus, the gender diversification in the tattoo world is helping to break barriers of traditional gender stereotypes. Tattooers seem to cope with the new waves of gender identities, being more likely to support the contestation of traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

The following chapter aims to provide with a overlook of theoretical sources surrounding professional identity and tattoo conventions.

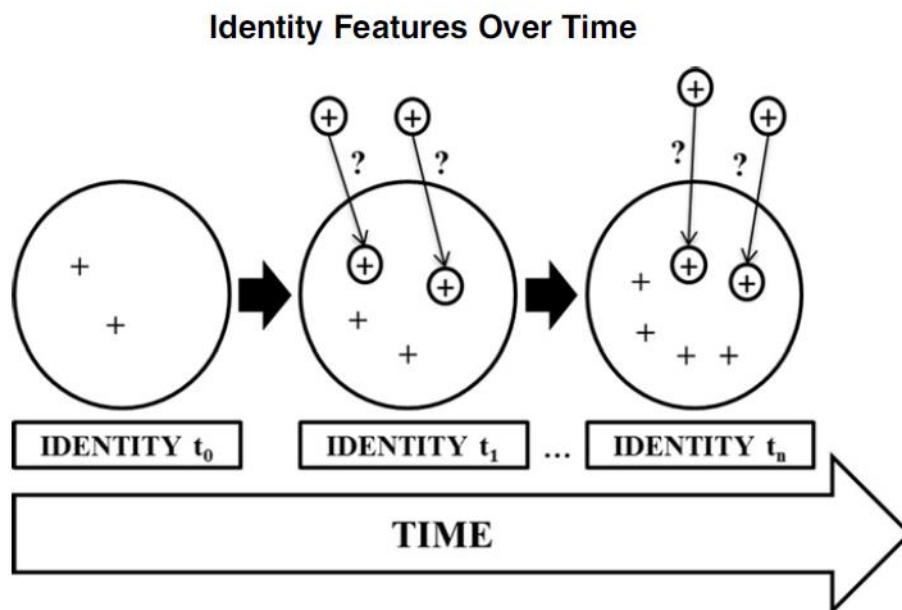
## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Professional identity overview

Profession is perhaps one of those ambiguous concepts people can encounter in their daily lives. It is hard to define what specific features differentiate professional occupations from other similar concepts such as jobs, crafts or vocations. Accordingly, numerous criteria have been proffered by communities of practitioners advocating for their acknowledgement as professions (Alexander, 2023). From a functionalist perspective, someone is considered a professional only after they had successfully finished the mandatory training, obtained the required certifications and credentials for their occupation, and fully embraced the profession's norms and values (Wilensky, as cited in Caza et Creary, 2016). Furthermore, this sociological current also assume that a professional group has some sort of monopoly, acquiring full authority over the practice and regulating the access of its members (Paquette, 2012). Thus, considering professional identity as a function of socially agreed qualities and attributes, legitimized by the accomplishment of the certain standards. The consequence of such definition is that only a limited number of working groups are labelled as professionals.

Taking this into account, this study conceives the concept of professional identity from an interactionist perspective. In this regard, Hughes (1958, as cited in Paquette, 2012) perceived work as a cultural changing experience where the identity construction is formed by a social an individual trajectory. Besides, these trajectories are conditioned by the distinct social worlds in which individuals are situated. Accordingly, it can be stated that people live in the intersection of different social contexts such as the familiar environment, political context, the market and their consumption, and the working environment. The professional identity is tied with the specific social world in which an individual is immersed, therefore, it is a subjective construction influenced by the interaction with others about their work. Therefore, professional identity is determined as the aggregate of qualities, beliefs, values, motivations and experiences that people use to define their professional self-concept (Caza et Creary, 2016; Elstad et Jansson, 2020). A graphic overview of such process can be observed in the following graph.

Figure 1.



*Note:* This graph was produced by Tomo in 2019, describing the way identity ads features over time. From “Professional Identity: Features and Implications”, by A. Tomo, 2019, *Professional identity crisis : balancing the internal and external perception of professional image* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 15) Copyright 2019 by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Because, professions are not only linked to social agreed qualities, the interactionist approach allows for a much wider study group, giving the possibility to further inquire upon deviant practices (Becker, 1963 as cited in Paquette, 2012). Moreover, some authors point out that the rise of independent knowledge workers has relaxed the criteria to classify professional occupations (Caza et Creary, 2016). Hence, the professional identity can be assessed regarding the experiences of a doctor, a lawyer, a musician or even a tattooer. However, it is important to note that the individual experience of work and the identity construction of its members is closely connected to the intricate aspects of a particular field. In that sense, the trajectories in the medical sector differ significantly from those in cultural fields such as the arts. Academic research on professional identity has focused on fields such as, Healthcare, Accounting and Engineering. Tomo (2019) found a lack of academic papers in the Arts and Culture field in comparison to the aforementioned ones.

The study of professional identities reveal the dynamics of distinctive professions and their change in time. Correspondingly, professional identity construction is considered as the process through which professions come to be defined. (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, as cited in Tomo, 2019). In that sense, the collective actions, social mobilization and the power dynamics of a field serve as building blocks for the identity construction. This means that the



way in which a specific profession is organized could be identified through testimonies of its members. To exemplify, the hierarchical structure of a field, its accessibility and its social codes may be fundamental for the construction of a specific professional identity. On this subject, Paquette (2012) states that professional identity is partially shaped by the disciplinary mechanisms and power struggles within institutional actors. However, the individual has agency, expressed by the means of resistance towards these established conventions. This is specially evident in the beginning of the working life as this is a period of vulnerability with significant personal and professional identity uncertainty (Elstad et Jansson, 2020).

Resistance is therefore, fundamental in the relationship between the individual and the profession where they belong. Tomo (2019) considers that a multi-level approach should consider professional identity as a process, but also should focus on the struggles ungendered by specific experiences.

In particular, Howard Becker delves into the multiplicity of experiences in the practice of arts in his book *Art Worlds* (1976). Here, he breaks the former notion of solitary genius by stating that the creative process is a result of a series of operations made possible by several workers. In that sense, artists partially build an identity in their relationship with other members of the art world where they belong. Moreover, he suggests that artists coordinate their activities around the conventional understanding of the practice, which means through social norms and codes (Becker, 1976). Therefore, professional identity in the arts is seen as how individuals relate to the professional group (art world) with which they have been associated (Caza et Creary, 2016). Moreover, in a study of deviant groups, Becker (1963, as cited in Pallete, 2012) reveals the importance of other personal experiences such as family and friendships in the identity construction processes of Jazz musicians. These complex interactions between worlds show that professionals seek for an integration between individual and social identities. In that sense, identity is influenced by the “dynamics of being and doing” (Tomo, 2019).

## 2.2 The tattoo as a craft

Nowadays, the meaning of the concepts of profession and craft are strictly linked to a point where is hard to recognize one from the other one (De Jonge, 2014). One of the similarities resides in the nature of expertise, both occupations focus on the development of advanced and specific knowledge (Caza et Creary, 2016). Besides, there is a need for human intervention as the tasks that professionals and craftsmanship perform cannot be relegated to machines.

However, some authors express that there are some differences on the way these occupations are organized. In that sense, crafts are usually horizontally structured in comparison to the hierarchical structure of professions (Banfield, 2023). What Banfield is trying to express with this differentiation is that crafts are usually decentralized and less institutionalized. Therefore, presupposing the existence of bureaucracies, procedures and stricter protocols in professions. The tattoo world in particular present a decentralized organization where the traditional norms are internalize by practitioners through socializing and experiencing the field (Adams, 2012) . In that sense, the traditional path to become a tattooer was through an apprenticeship. Nowadays, the boom of tattooers and the easy access to tattooing equipment has made people start from their houses (DeMello, 2000 as cited in Broom, 2015). At this regard, the lack of formal institutions where people can learn the tattooing profession is due in part to the set of values associated to the profession (Mabry, 2021).

Another important differentiation between crafts and professions is that the second ones are associated with the creation of abstract values while crafts are based on the manipulation of concrete materials (De Jonge, 2014). According to Banfield (2023) established fields such as Geography and Psychology present bigger theoretical knowing and hierarchical ways of accreditation such as University degrees and standardized working markets. At this regard, some authors have stated that in crafts such as tattooing, tacit knowledge is acquired and improved through practice in a self-taught and amateur way (Becker et at, 2021). Nonetheless, the differences do not exclude the possibility of crafts being analysed from a professional perspective. In that sense, while professions like healthcare workers professionalism is associated with how much the standardized norms are embodied and the use of systematically acquired knowledge (Paquette, 2012). For, crafts professionalism is understood as “socially learned competencies, embodied in individuals’ performances and contingent on their self-perceptions as members of occupational communities” (Sela-Sheffey, 2023, p. 89). This means, that socialization and reflection are part of how craft workers build their professional identities. Lynne (1998) expresses that the craft world intersect with cultural, political, and social domains because crafting and craft objects give material expressions to ideas, roles, identities and relationships in the social world. In that sense, crafting is not a singular occupation, instead, is a social construction of different actors based on their interaction.

The professional identity of tattooers have been studied by several academics. This research takes insights from the ethnographic work of Mabry (2021) who focus on the life experiences of a tattoo shop, the learning process and the unwritten rules that tattoo artists follow. Amos (2019) interviewed female tattoo artists to understand how they form an identity based on the interaction with their clients, and their peers. Besides, Glynn (2017) through interviews gathered information about tattoo artists and clients interactions to understand the context in which the tattooers are immersed. The autobiographical work of Nash (2018) reveal the importance of a timeline in the operationalization of professional identity. As she explain in the story, her tattoos and their significance mutated over the years. For instance, she became aware of the male gaze in which woman bodies are submerged and her tattoos became badges of contestation of gender stereotypes.

This study focuses on understanding the construction of a professional identity in the crafts by using tattooers as subject of study. The aforementioned statement means that this study consider the tattoo world as a craft world and the tattooer as a craftsmanship. However, this is not a single attribution due to the multifaceted nature of the tattooer profession. In order to break the concept of professional identity in this particular craft, the definition of the tattoo world conventions are must. Nonetheless, the conventions have been established given the particular illegitimate history of the field. Therefore, the following chapter is “Brief history of delegitimization and the Tattoo Renaissance” where I exposed the conditions of the Tattoo world and its history of being labelled as non legitimate practice.

### 2.3 Brief history of delegitimization and the Tattoo Renaissance

Tattoos are just a single expression of the wide group of body modification practices, in which piercings, implants, scarifications and even hairstyles have a part. Nonetheless, tattoos are considered as semipermanent marks with visual signification. The oldest register of a tattooed body is a mummified corpse with rudimental designs who has more than 3000 years of antiquity (Carmen et al, 2012). Moreover, tattoos have been encountered in Western cultures such as the Greeks, Romans and Celts, their significance greatly vary depending on the context of each culture (Glynn, 2017).

Regardless the aforementioned evidence of tattoo practices, contemporary western tattoos seem to be an inspiration of indigenous cultures from the Micro Polynesia. In that sense, existing documentation shows how two of the most significant tattooed cultures, the Māori’s and the Samoan were encountered by sailors during the colonization expansion (Thompson, 2015). In particular, these cultures established motifs for the tattoos depending

on gender roles and social status. Besides, tattoos were considered a fundamental body ornament because they were a relevant part of the identity of each individual (Ponton, 2017). The practice of tattooing was exclusively performed by heavily tattooed women, whom, the community recognized as dexterous artisans (Thompson, 2015).

After the cultural encounters in the Polynesia, western communities interpreted the tattoo practices in two different ways. On one side, some sailors started copying these practices by tattooing representations of important life stages in themselves. However, the majority observed tattooing as paganism which triggered a wave of persecution that almost drove to extinction the traditional indigenous practices (Thompson, 2015). This delegitimization would define the history of tattoos in western countries for the next 400 years.

Back in western societies, the inspired male sailors showed their amateur tattoos to the population, and by sharing experiences, they motivated others to get their own designs. During this first pinnacles of western tattoo history, the work was done with improvised tools by amateurs (Thompson, 2015). An increasing pressure for more tattoos brought as a consequence the opening of the first shops in America and Europe during the end of the XIX century. The development of the firsts modern tattoo machines facilitate the development of tattoo shops and western styles such as the traditional American tattoo, which consists on bold lines and sailor topics (Thompson, 2015). Subsequently, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relevance of group membership in different western societies grew. The spread of nationalistic ideas, together with the influence of wars were reflected in the tattoo world. Accordingly, different groups used tattoos as a way to communicate strong messages with different meanings. For instance, high rank Nazis officers tattooed themselves the secret police logo to prove their commitment with the political ideal. Moreover, they used tattoos to identify Jewish prisoners in the concentration camps which reduce them as mere things to be managed (Abatemarco, 2021; Boszorád, 2019).

Other groups, such as military service men, barbers, sailors and tattooers also used tattoos as a group membership, this led to an association between working class members and tattoos. During this time, these groups were predominantly male directed, which created an association between the tattooed body and hyper-masculinity (Botz-Bornstein, 2013). Later on, divergent groups such as motor bikers, male prisoners and gang members also acquired tattoos. Hence, tattoos and criminality (Khomar et Lathrop, 2008) and also deviant behaviour

(Camacho, 2017) were subject of different sociological research. In summary, several events kept the profession of tattooing delegitimated in the western imaginary.

However, the dynamics around tattoos changed dramatically after the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several authors named these new periods the Tattoo Renaissance (Boszorád, 2019). Initially, artists went back to the tradition reimagining indigenous designs, creating new styles embedded in an environment of increasing aesthetic legitimation (Larsen et al, 2014). However, others such as Weiler and Jacobsen (2021) believe there was a switch in the use of tattoos as in modern times, as they are use with aesthetic purposes. Moreover, processes of secularization and detraditionalization during the last decades of the new Tattoo Renaissance may have had an impact in the relevance of tattoos, as they might becoming simple superficial marks of the fashion culture (Broome, 2015).

In this regard, mass media played an important role by forecasting influential people with tattoos, and also by giving accountability to the new tattooed educated middle class (Thompson, 2015). For instance, Tv shows with tattoo thematic popularized the practice of tattooing between circles where tattooing was consider low brow culture. Television exposure has been erasing that underground subculture mark from the tattoo world by targeting demographic groups among casual leisure consumers (Yuen, 2018). Tattooers in this time highlight not only by their artistic work but also by their aesthetics as they star Tv shows and appear on magazines. The popularization of tattooers as celebrities and their aesthetics had an impact in people body taste and their decisions for have tattooed bodies. In that sense, several authors have found that tattoos are nowadays statistically more present in younger audiences and in the female spectrum (Komar et Lathrop, 2008; Carmen et al, 2012; Skoda et al, 2020).

Furthermore, the popularization of tattoos put in the imaginary of the new generations the idea of becoming a tattooer, which influenced the increase of the practice of tattooing by amateurs in their houses (Broome, 2015). This could be a reflect of the lack of institutions to learn which motivates people to creates paths for self learning in predation of traditional ways of doing so. Even though there has been several efforts for the opening of tattoo schools, the results prove a lack of institutionalization (Adamas, 2012). Besides, tattooers have are against learning practices that go against the apprenticeship tradition (Mabry, 2021).

On the other hand, other authors believe that the Tattoo Renaissance changed the narratives behind tattoos, because people moved from group membership to a status of “Modern primitivism” where customers are concerned about their individuality, spirituality,

personal growth and where female empowerment is present (Klesse, 2007). In particular, women play an important role in this period of time as their value as artists and wearers of tattoos increased. In this regard, *LA Ink* was a Tv show that highlighted the presence and talent of women in tattoo spaces that were traditionally masculine (Yuen, 2018). Moreover, the inclusion of women in the practice of tattoos changed the appearance of tattoo parlours, which may have had as a consequence the attraction of other types of customers (Fedorenko et al, 1999). The redefinition of the profession might have also influenced the popularization of tattoos as, tattooers label themselves as tattoo artists, and the parlours became tattoo studios or tattoo shops (Adams, 2012).

In summary, the Tattoo Renaissance represent constant changes in how tattoos are used by western societies. Besides, people nowadays build different narratives from tattoo experiences and the relationship within identity creation. These new narratives deal with three main characteristics, the new relevance of tattoo aesthetics, the contemporary tattoo workforce and their ways to learn and the increasing importance of gender identities.

## 2.4 Tattoo conventions

### 2.4.1 Aesthetics

Body modifications are part of the bigger group of body decorations together with body painting and body ornamentations (Atkinson et Young, 2010). The popularization of body modifications and their visibility in the city landscape have made the streets a mobile gallery. Here, fantasy creatures, hidden messages, patterns, colours and intricate jewellery appear to us like characters from the most imaginative painters (Lautman, 1994; as cited in Fedorenko et al, 1999). In that sense, the streets are filled with modified bodies in which implants, plastic surgeries, cosmetic practices, hairstyles and tattoos are the most common procedures. Body modifications differ from one another in several criteria such as the extent, the intrusiveness, how safe they are, the reasons behind them and their accessibility (Maclaran et al, 2018). In the bigger picture, these practices are embedded into what scholars called the cosmetic gaze, consisting in how humans perceive their bodies as incomplete projects, which are subject to modifications in order to achieve a true better self (Wegenstein, 2012). Bodies are conceived as an intersection of moral, aesthetic and sensuous characteristics, in that sense, body projects are also reflexive projects (Maclaran et al, 2018). The cosmetic gaze recognize that men and women are influenced by standards of beauty, usually portrayed in mass media with the message of how people should look and behave (Heggenstaller et al, 2018). The reflection of such phenomena had as a consequence the

increasing popularity of body modification practices such as plastic surgery and tattoos (Adams, 2012). Even though aesthetic has been an important topic in the study of the tattoos as a cultural product, research has mostly ignored tattoo artists experiences from the analysis.

In general, ideas behind the use of body modification practices are usually observed from a consumerism perspective. Nevertheless, there are some biological hypothesis than claim a relationship with the search of partners. Perhaps the most influential is the comparison with the peacock tail. Humans engage in body modification in the same way that birds try to convince a possible match, the peacock displays its tail to appear physically more appealing to possible matches (Hogh-Olsen, 2018). Humans in that sense will rule their bodies and embody ideals of beauty to increase their possibilities to match with other partners. The modification of the body is an innate characteristic of humans as a species, as it is the first expression of the aesthetic impulse, which relates to our complex symbolic nature (Hogh-Olsen, 2018). Accordingly, humans are in a dichotomy of being communicative and inherently semiotic, which explains why we use our bodies as the first information we provide to the rest. At the same time, the body is also the first piece of data we receive from others.

The tattooed body can be studied through the lens of its aesthetic features and relevance. In that sense, aesthetics could be assessed by a multi-dimensional perspective where symmetry, complexity, novelty, familiarity, appeal to social status and individual preferences play a role (Weiler et al, 2021). However, how people understand their bodies and the embodiment of their ideas has also a relationship with their profession and the society in which they are immersed. In this regard, people working with body modifications engage into process where they extend their own body towards others (Mabry, 2021). This means that body workers are influenced by the working conditions in which they are immersed. The study of aesthetics then, takes a different approach because it needs to be understood rather than measured.

At this regard, tattoos are considered visual images and as such they can be interpreted by others in the interaction with them. This also relates to the fact that nowadays we rely on the exhibition of modified bodies rather than the suppression of visual skin imagery (Atkins et Young, 2010). In the Tattoo Renaissance in which we are immerse, tattoos significance differ from previous times in different stages. Primarily, tattoos have the mark of group membership to a much lesser extent nowadays, which in western countries, has reduced the

stigmatic mark that was previously attached (Botz-Bornstein, 2013). Instead, in modern times, tattoos have been labelled as the result of the constant pressure to stand within a group, therefore, people aim to create a single identity through visual aesthetics (Carmen et al, 2012). This is only possible in contemporary times because the aesthetic rules of western societies have changed, positioning the attractiveness of body ornaments. The former conception of the skin as something pure and clean has changed, being replaced by the skin as a wall where desires and tastes are manifested (Botz-Bornstein, 2013).

Nowadays, tattoos are inscriptions in the body like the graffiti in the walls of a city where people project different desires (Botz-Bornstein, 2013). The question is then how to read those desires. How do people ascribe meaning to visual images and why is it different from before. First of all, tattoos have become badges of differentiation, people use them to create a sense of individuality (Atkinson, 2001). This individuality is built in a context of consumer capitalism, where our taste and individual willingness and consumption shape the way we embody our ideas (Ghigi et al, 2018). Therefore, tattooing as a practice means the understanding of a sea of knowledge present in bodies that is articulated by actors/consumers through specific objects (Becker et al, 2021) Those bodies are also influenced by external actors and their bodies directly reflect their thoughts. For instance, beautifying the body is one of the main reasons of body modification as individuals relate to prevalent statements of fashion (Weiler et al, 2021).

The aesthetic dimension considers the interaction between different actions, symbolic elements and sensible knowledge (Becker et al, 2021). Accordingly, the relevant information is storage inside the life experiences of the artists who are wall and painter at the same time. As our consumption defines what we are, the tattooers in the act of engraving meaningful images in our skins might be shaping us to some extent. Nonetheless, they are also shaped by their tattooing experiences. The visual image that a tattoo represents has no value if it is not accompanied by the argument, by the significance. That's why a simple study of images may have little value in the interpretation. Furthermore, there is value even if in the explanation of the tattoo the answer is there's no meaning ascribe to my tattoos, they are just the product of my impulsive desires. At first glance, this statement indicates that information cannot be gathered from that experience. However, the fact that tattoos in a skin are meaningless is already an important piece of information. Due to the historical connotation of tattoos, meaningless tattoos are by nature a contestation.



#### 2.4.2 Apprenticeship and socialization

In a more general overview, apprenticeship practices are both a mode of learning and a mode of education, they are conceived as the traditional way of learning based on experience that is transmitted from a master to a student or apprentice (Billet, 2016). Observing the past, human societies taught disciplines by means of apprenticeships. For instance, crafts, agriculture, smithy, tattooing and even cleaning were for a long time knowledge that was passed from generations to other generations. In particular, in the apprenticeship practice, the individual experiences are premised upon interest and values, which means the construction of life stories and ways of behaving regarding the specific craft (Billet, 2016). Furthermore, in specific crafting activities there is a transmission of tacit knowledge from a experienced master to the apprentice (Smith, 2001). Finally, there is a perpetuation of craft transmission because the one student becomes a master when the experience has reached a confident level of skill. Perhaps the biggest problem with the apprenticeships in the past is that the transmission of knowledge was based on a verbal communication rather than a specific and methodical way of transmission. This natural characteristic has an impact in crafts, specially in tattooing as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Traditionally, tattooing was one of those disciplines taught through the means of an apprenticeship. The apprentice system consisted in the adoption of students by an experienced tattooer, and the reproduction of knowledge based on the tutor's criteria. Usually, the new student had to understand the dynamics of the shop before having the chance of doing tattoos. At this regard, some of the tasks assigned to apprentices consisted on sweeping the floors, soldering the needles, dealing with clinical waste, and organizing appointments for the artists (Broome, 2015). However, this was also added to the learning of practical drawing knowledge, the skin is a different material than the paper, in that sense, one would have to learn what works and what does not for a tattoo. In particular, this refers to the relationship between tattooing and provisional tacit knowledge which guided by aesthetic categories overlap the previously acquired drawing knowledge (Becker et al, 2021). During these first stages of the apprenticeship, people learn through observation, besides knowledge is build in the blend of the dialogue with tattooers, the experience of being tattooed and the drawing practice (Becker et al, 2021). Nonetheless, this way of learning also contains a dense ethical content that entails the ability to control the pace at which the tattooer learn but also to internalize the values of the profession (Adams, 2012). At this regard, Mabry (2021) stated

that the tattoo world is extremely decentralized given that there are no institutions that regulate the practice, nonetheless, tattooing is established over a set of conventions or rules of work. These conventions are most of the times learnt during the first stages of the apprenticeship, however, in other cases, they might be the result of an interaction with peers.

The current context of the tattoo world might be an indication of the rapid decreasing of tattoo apprenticeships. For instance, Broom (2015) in her study about the start of the tattooing process remark that many of her subjects have started tattooing in their houses, by self learning rather than the traditional apprentice way. Furthermore, tattooing has moved from a stigmatized position towards a fashionable and slightly legitimized practice, which together with the ease of acquiring tattooing equipment and supplies has made several amateurs start tattooing from scratch (Adams, 2012). The ethnographic work of Broom (2015) shows how the access to tattoo equipment motivates new tattooers on performing experiments in fruits, friends or relatives and even in their own skins. It is surprising that amateur practices grow faster than the professionalization of tattoo schools, however, it might be related to the non completely legitimized status of tattoo practices. At this regard, Mabry (2021) shows the lack of motivation of tattooers to support the creation of tattoo schools. In fact, he narrates how several students that graduate from schools in the US became stigmatized by established tattooers. This also explain why Adams (2012) believe the tattoo market is heavily fragmented with little internal cohesion among its participants.

Furthermore, other authors believe that even though apprenticeships are structured processes of socialization, the ethical character of tattooing is experienced in the accumulation of direct tattooing practices (Mabry, 2021). At this regard, practitioners and professionals reframe their practice by production and reproduction, here, observation and feedback is fundamental in a tattooers career (Becker et al, 2021). Consequently, knowledge is also articulated in the interaction with peers, by working with others, tattooers may experience different growing developments in the way they act, their tastes and their process of trial and error (Becker et al, 2021). Mabry (2021) also stated that for amateur and self-taught forms of learning, tattoo conventions are learnt by the interaction with other tattooers.

In the following section, I want to explore the concept of gender in the tattoo world. In the same way society has imposed gender stereotypes, the ideas of masculinity and femininity are reflected in how people use tattoos. The dynamics between tattooers are also influenced by these societal issues as in the past the practice was labelled as a masculine profession.

### 2.4.3 Gender identity and tattoos

Thinking back on the brief history of tattoos, one can observe that there is a clear gender connotation on tattoos. Indigenous cultures in the Polynesia visually defined the role of men and women in the skin. The word tattoo comes from the Samoan *tatau* that means a local set of identities and experiences (Thompson, 2015). In particular, the Samoan community established different motifs for the skin engravings depending on gender roles and status. (Ponton, 2017). This gender differentiation in the motifs might be an important indicator of feminine and masculine divergencies. In a similar way, western societies established behavioural roles to the binary division of gender. These gender stereotypes have been defined as the consensual beliefs regarding the attributes of men and women in society (Eagly et al, 2020). Men are expected to perform physical labour while women have been related to less heavy duties in their professions (Heggenstaller et al, 2018). The tattoo world is a reflection of such gender dichotomy. Traditionally labelled as a masculine space, female and queer tattooers have expressed to have suffered gender discrimination in their professional experiences (Mabry, 2021).

In women, tattoos play an important role because they are seen as contestation of traditional standards of femininity in the binary division of gender (Nash, 2018). Hence, in the Tattoo Renaissance tattoos are no longer over stigmatized but gradually recognized as an artistic feature (Hogh-Olesen, 2018). Some authors support this by comparing gender roles in tattooed women. For instance, Skoda (2020) quantitatively observed the relationship between female sexual openness, tattoos visibility and egalitarianism finding that women with tattoos were more likely to endorse egalitarian gender-roles and to have a more open perspective towards sexual encounters. Nonetheless, society still follows behavioural patterns for females as heavily tattooed women are negatively perceived in comparison to heavily tattooed males (Swami and Furnham (2007) as cited in Skoda et al, 2020). This is because, in becoming tattooed, women engage in a reconfiguration or intentional deviance from prevailing norms of personal appearance, which in a patriarchal society creates discomfort (Yuen, 2018). Professionally, female tattooers have to prove their worth from marginal positions while carrying a heavier societal judgement than men (Mabry, 2021).

Some theorists have stated that given the prejudices that society impose over tattooed females, a skin covered with ink engravings might free and empower women from the submissive feminine stereotypes (DeMello, 2000 as cited in Nash, 2018). This statement attacks the traditional conception of the blank female skin observed as a void that males filled

with their own desires (Thorsten-Botz, 2012) In that sense, the body is a paper where cultural expectations of gender are display. Hence, in a patriarchal social system the cultural expectation of gender limits women decisions and body freedom. In this regard, women then take the role of subversive, as their tattooed bodies contest typical western concepts of the "attractive" feminine body (Atkinson et Young, 2010). In relation to that, the tattoo world has been labelled as traditionally masculine in the Western imaginary. This is due to the fact that the white, working class men build the settlements of the practice in the Euro-American context (Mabry, 2021). This has imposed a gender connotation to the practice to the point where large tattoos and heavily tattooed bodies are observed as symbols of "hypermasculinity" (Magnet, 2002, as cited in Thorsten-Botz, 2012). In that sense, the idea of subversive behaviour might be worth to study, female tattooers appear here as an important actor due to their role of producers and wearers of tattoos.

On the contrary, the first tattoos that women popularized are now considered kitschy because they represent the submission to the traditional feminine woman (Thomson, 2015). For instance, the tattoos popularized during the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century were roses, flowers, colourful and docile animals like dolphins and cats, mostly small and placed in the hip, shoulder and the breast (Thompson, 2015). However, those are not the motifs one can find in the majority of women bodies nowadays. In fact, tattooed women artists have adapted in a male dominated environment, therefore, contesting traditional feminine aesthetics (Mabry, 2021). Given that bodies are a social construction pressured by the social statement of beauty, the tattooed skin in women might be an indicator of insurgency.

In academia, several scholars have studied the perception of body modifications and the relationship between tattoos and identities following quantitative research methods (Camacho, 2017; Skoda et al, 2020), besides, the relationship between tattoos, gender and ethnicities (Komar, 2008). However, this study takes a qualitative approach, focusing on testimonies and life experiences. The perception of heavily tattooed people has already been studied by the means of interviews by other scholars in the past. For instance, the work of Thomson (2015) has as a base the narratives of heavily tattooed women to understand how they challenge the dominant culture of beauty. Moreover, Madfis and Arford (2013) used semi-structured interviews to observe how tattooed people inscribe meaning into their tattoos in a way of legitimizing their ownership. Therefore, the following chapter presents the chosen methodology for this study.

Tattooers live in a changing environment that has several inconveniences. The lack of institutional control makes the tattooing world a decentralized craft with disperse and diverse knowledge. People get into tattooing by different means and reasons. Tattooers start from home or are guided by skilful professionals. What is clear is that the acquisition of technical knowledge is usually based on practice and repetition. Paradoxically, tattooers deal with the infliction of pain and the manipulation of people aesthetics that are strictly linked to their identities. As such, with the responsibility of such sensitive subject, one would expect a more controlled field. However, the tattooers embody their practices by showing their own tattooed aesthetics, contesting gender stereotypes and socializing and collaborating with others. Their professional identity seems to be hidden between the intersection of being consumers and producers. However, this has never been studied before by scholars. Besides, the tattoo world has several gender connotation that are worth to evaluate. In this research, I want to answer the following questions.

“ How tattooers in The Netherlands build their professional identities based on their experiences of tattooing and being tattooed?”

The following chapter aims to address the methodological guideline followed to respond to the aforementioned research question.

### 3. Methods and data

The aim of this study is to understand the construction of a professional identity of tattooers residing in The Netherlands, uncovering relationships between their professional and their personal life experiences. Besides, those experiences revolve around tattoos as cultural product, which means the experiences of tattooing and being tattooed. In the theoretical framework I defined several key concepts that are used to build the research design and further evidence in the results.

#### 3.1 Methodology

Therefore, the methodology chosen for this study is a thematic analysis where the data comes from semi structured interviews. This approach has been defined as a qualitative and descriptive method of analysing data, aiming for the identification and analysis of patterns that will later on be reported (Vaismorandi et al, 2013). Thematic analysis has been used for the study of life stories because it allows to break big chunks of text into small units of content. Besides, it ensures that themes derived from the analysis are accurate representations of the data. The interview guide is based on the previous study of Glynn (2017) who already developed a framework to interview tattoo artists and their professional experiences. However, my contribution comes from understanding the tattooer identity as a construction of not only professional but also personal experiences. Therefore, I use the consumer perspectives of tattooers as a determinant factor of their professional behaviours. Accordingly, the interview guide used for this research<sup>1</sup> is divided in two parts. The first part dive into the career path of the tattooer and its relationship with the tattoo world norms and values. I used the ethnographic research of Nash (2018) to identified the most relevance conventions that tattooers follow during the professional lives.

Tattoo artists live in the intersection of being producers and consumers of the same cultural product. Stablishing a parallel with musicians, one could think for example, that musicians not only produce music, they are constantly consuming music and interacting with other artists. In that sense, there is an intermingled cycle of consumption and production that is identifiable in different cultural products. Tattoo artists are often passionate about tattoos, they sometimes have tattoos before even doing them on others skins. In particular, this research proves certain pattern in the way tattooers access the Tattoo world. For instance, all of them agreed on being tattooed before starting doing them on others. Their consumption might have an important influence on how they work and how they relate to their clients. That

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<sup>1</sup> Research guide can be consulted in the Annexes 1.

is why it is surprising the lack of sources that construct intersectional studies of producers-consumers. This particular research is similar to the previous studies on professional identity (Broom, 2015; Mabry, 2021; Larsen et al, 2014) as narratives are the most important source of information to understand the construction of an identity.

### 3.2 Operationalization

The interview process was done by means of in situ interviews in the workplaces of the tattoo artists. This allowed me to visit different shops in the 4 cities where the study took place. By observing the studios I notice how different were ones from the others. This gave me an idea on how diverse the tattoo profession could be, at least in aesthetic terms. However, I discovered that the interview process was highlighting themes that were not relatively relevant for the construction of the interview guide. Therefore, the interview process became iterative, which means that the interview focus suffered some particular additions along the way. For instance, the research had from the start an important gender connotation. However, the first interviewees were claiming more relevance in their learning processes for the construction of the professional identity. Hence, I added questions regarding this phenomenon, I further inquired about the apprenticeship characteristics and its importance for the artists career development. This was reflected in the length of the interviews, as such the first ones were between 28-40 minutes in comparison to the last ones that had a length in average 48 minutes.

Once the interview process was completed, I proceed to transcribe the audio text into a writing document. I made use of two audio transcription software, Otter and Temi were my selected tools. This saved a considerable amount of time while providing with accurate transcriptions. Subsequently, I manually edited some parts to give complete accuracy. In total I gathered an approximate of 660 minutes of recordings divided in 15 interviews with 16 subjects. One interview was done to an artist that was tattooing and responding at the same time. In this case, he was tattooing his colleague, and I thought it was appropriate to add her into the sample. This occurrence was interesting because it allowed me to observe the specificities of the tattoo experience from an objective/outsider point of view. Their insights even though were gathered in the same interview have been processed separately for the accuracy of the analysis.

Another experience I lived, that I consider has made this research more rich is the after-talking when some interviews were over. This happened twice, in spaces the where I had to interview two tattooers in the same day and studio. Tattooers are social by nature, as

they experience in their work several emotions from their clients. It is also an occupation that requires networking skills. Therefore, the aftermath of those interviews were conversations about the topics of the interview that I could not avoid to use. I asked for consent to add this new information to the interview and after a verbal recognition I started the recording again. Here I felt the tattooers were slightly more relaxed than before, communicating with more ease. Besides, the information gathered from these chunks of recordings provided insights into the analysis.

Following into the operationalization, I uploaded all the documents into the Atlas.ti program to start the coding process. Initially, I performed an open coding session for each interview, to organize the data into smaller and more cohesive chunks of information. This gave me 335 open codes, that got reduced to 247. I had to merge 74 similar codes and also delete 51 others that were unnecessary. Moreover, I selected 23 In Vivo codes that I considered more relevant for future quotation purposes. Subsequently, I grouped the codes on 20 initial categories. Nonetheless, after a further consideration, those 20 categories were merged into 10 because they have a more clear relationship with the questions. Finally, three main themes appeared in the intersection between the categories and the literature review.

The structure of the coding process can be observed in the code three Anexes 2. The three shows The operationalization is depicted in the following tables.

The following tables show the three overarching themes that resulted from the coding process. There are two tables for each theme. The first one shows how each theme is observable. The definition of categories which are at the same time the subdivision of themes for the results part. The second table, shows a relationship between sources and questions from the interview guide. It serves as a source framework for the results section.

Table 1.

| Theme 1       | Definition   | Main categories          |
|---------------|--|--------------------------|
| Socialization | Self tattooing the body as empathy and respect for the other   | Self tattooing practices |
|               | Technicalities, the conception of tattoo as a permanent mark, critics towards new forms of tattooing | Professional conduct     |



|  |  |                |
|--|--|----------------|
|  | Legitimation of the practice, perceptions upon the field and certain predetermined conventions                         | Legitimization |
|  | The importance of a tattooed body in the tattooer identity together with the reflections upon his/her/their aesthetics | Aesthetics     |

Table 1. Definition main categories for Socialization. Author creation.

Table 2.

| Theme 1       | Sources   | Questions  |
|---------------|---|--|
| Socialization | Broome, K. (2006). Tattooing starts at home: tattooing, affectivity, and sociality. <i>Fashion Theory</i> , 10(3), 333–350. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2752/136270406778050860">https://doi.org/10.2752/136270406778050860</a><br>Billett, S. (2016).                            | Have you done tattoos on your own skin? How was the experience like?                 |
|               | Glynn, S. J. (2017). You think it, they ink it : interactive service encounters in the tattoo industry (dissertation). Vanderbilt University.   | Do you have a tattoo style? How would you describe your productions?                 |
|               | Nash, M. (2018). From ‘tramp stamps’ to traditional sleeves: a feminist autobiographical account of tattoos. <i>Australian Feminist Studies</i> , 33(97), 362–383. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2018.1542591">https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2018.1542591</a>      | Have you experience negative comments or judgements due to your tattoos?             |
|               | Weiler, S. M., & Jacobsen, T. (2021). "i'm getting too old for this stuff": the conceptual structure of tattoo aesthetics. <i>Acta Psychologica</i> , 219, 103390–103390. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2021.103390">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2021.103390</a> | What are your opinions on the following statement? A tattoo artist must have tattoos |

Table 2. Relationship sources, questions and Socialization. Author creation.

Table 3.

| Theme 2          | Definition  | Main categories                          |
|------------------|---|--|
| Learning process | Introduction to the tattoo world, narratives around the first tattooing experiences | Starting point of the tattooer career    |
|                  | Apprenticeship, experiences, perspectives   | Apprenticeship or other ways of learning |

|  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| What is the role of peers in the development of expertise, not only by sharing knowledge, but also by getting tattooed by them | Peers interactions       |
| Tattooing as a social ritual, what do clients provide to the tattooer identity   | Clients interactions     |
| Learning through the use of its own skin   |                          |
| Relationships between the body and the productions   | Self tattooing practices |

Table 3. Definition main categories Learning process. Author creation.

Table 4.

| Theme 2          | Sources   | Questions   |
|------------------|---|---|
| Learning process | Broome, K. (2006). Tattooing starts at home: tattooing, affectivity, and sociality. <i>Fashion Theory</i> , 10(3), 333–350. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2752/136270406778050860">https://doi.org/10.2752/136270406778050860</a>   | What was the first tattoo you did on someone and how was the experience behind it?  |
|                  | Apprenticeship as a mode of learning and model of education. <i>Education Training</i> , 58(6), 613–628. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-01-2016-0001">https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-01-2016-0001</a>  | Have you done an apprenticeship, can you tell me about your experience?   |
|                  | Mabry, D. (2021). Blood and Lightning: The Embodied Production of a Tattooer. UC Davis. Retrieved from <a href="https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00z2f3ww">https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00z2f3ww</a>  | Now, I would like to ask about your last tattoo experience, what differences do you find from the first one in terms of symbolic value, design, experience? |
|                  | Becker, R. G., Campos, S. A. P. D., & Antonello, C. S. (2021). The Construction of Knowledge in the Work of a Tattoo Artist: A Look from the Perspective of Aesthetics. <i>Organizações &amp; Sociedade</i> , 28, 830-859 <a href="https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-92302021v28n9905EN">https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-92302021v28n9905EN</a> | What role do you think tattoos have in someone's identity?  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | <p>Botz-Bornstein, T. (2013). From the stigmatized tattoo to the graffitied body: femininity in the tattoo renaissance. <i>Gender, Place &amp; Culture</i>, 20(2), 236–252.<br/> <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674930">https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674930</a></p>           | <p>Do you socialize with your clients the reasons why the get the tattoos?</p>                                 |
|  | <p>Arp, R. (2012). <i>Tattoos : philosophy for everyone : i ink, therefore i am</i>. Wiley-Blackwell. Retrieved from <a href="https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/doi/book/10.1002/9781118252789">https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/doi/book/10.1002/9781118252789</a></p> | <p>Is there any relationship between the tattoos in your own body and the tattoos you do on others bodies?</p> |

Table 4. Relationship sources, questions and Learning process. Author creation.

Table 5.

| Theme 3         | Definition   | Main categories                           |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Gender identity | How the tattooer identify and how does it observe his/her/their body                               | Gender profile                            |
|                 | What is the position of the artist regarding gender stereotypes such as masculinity and femininity | Gender stereotypes                        |
|                 | Narratives regarding the change in gender stereotypes and how people get tattoos nowadays          | Perceivable changes in gender stereotypes |
|                 | Women presence in tattoo spaces, how does affect the practice                                      |   |

Table 5. Definition main categories Gender Identity. Author creation.

Table 6.

| Theme 3         | Sources  | Questions  |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Gender identity | <p>Thompson, B. Y. (2015). <i>Covered in ink : "Tattoos, women and the politics of the body"</i>. In <i>Sailors, criminals, and prostitutes : the history of a lingering tattoo stigma</i>. essay, NYU Press.<br/> <a href="https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814760000.003.0002">https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814760000.003.0002</a></p> | <p>How do you define yourself in terms of gender and sexual orientation?</p> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Klesse, C. (2007). Racialising the politics of transgression: body modification in queer culture. <i>Social Semiotics</i> , 17(3), 275–292. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330701448561">https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330701448561</a>  | Are your tattoos a reflect of your gender and sexual orientation?   |
| Botz-Bornstein, T. (2013). From the stigmatized tattoo to the graffitied body: femininity in the tattoo renaissance. <i>Gender, Place &amp; Culture</i> , 20(2), 236–252. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674930">https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.674930</a>  | Do you think any of your tattoos might not be consider masculine/femini ne by society   |
| Amos, J. (2019). "I can do whatever the hell I want": female tattoo artists, their experiences, and identity creation. Bowling Green State University. Retrieved from: <a href="http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1572816773151793">http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgsu1572816773151793</a>           | Have you ever had a client with a request that challenged traditional gender roles or stereotypes? How did you approach that request? |
| Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., & Sczesny, S. (2020). Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 75(3), 301–315. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000494">https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000494</a> | Do you feel that the attitudes towards tattoos and gender stereotypes have changed over time? If so, how?                             |

Table 6. Author creation. Relationship sources, questions and Gender Identity,

### 3.2 Units of analysis / sample

The units of analysis in this case are interviews made to tattoo artist that work in The Netherlands, they have to be heavily tattooed, which means that their skin is covered at least in a degree of 40%. Besides, the sampling criteria was the following; I. Tattoo artists working in The Netherlands. II. Tattoo artist that belong to a studio in the main Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, The Hague) or its surroundings. III. At least 3 years of experience doing tattoos. IV. Available for an in situ interview.

The sample was selected following a mix of sampling methods. First of all, I followed a snowball sampling method. I selected 4 tattoo artists from 4 different shops that I found on Instagram. I used social media visibility as the first filter for the sampling. The subjects were selected from 4 main cities in The Netherlands given the feasibility of in situ interviews. Accordingly, one shop in Rotterdam, two shops in The Hague and one shop in Utrecht were selected. After conducting the first 4 interviews, I proceed to ask the artists about other artists

that would be interested in the research. That gave me another 6 subjects to interview, increasing the shop sample to 8 different shops and my total amount of interviews summed 10. After conducting the 70% of the interviews I was left with several notions that influenced me to change my sampling process. I started to wondering if it would be interesting to select the last 4 subjects based on a purposive sampling method. This gave me the chance to interview a micro realism tattoo artist and a non-binary hand poke artist.

The following table provides with the categorization of the subjects regarding several relevant aspects. As an important note, all the artists agreed on the use of their name or nickname for the research paper, which simplified greatly the analysis and the use of the information.

Table 8.

| Tattoo artist | City                    | Country of origin | Experience | Gender       | Style                                      |
|---------------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|--|
| Horikichi     | Rotterdam               | Japan             | + 25 years | Male         | Tebori, traditional Japanese               |
| Fiona         | Rotterdam               | Netherlands       | +15 years  | Female       | Illustrative with a mix of realism         |
| InkEliza      | Amsterdam               | Poland            | 3-4 years  | Female       | Blackwork, fine line                       |
| Spaceman      | Rotterdam               | South Africa      | +15 years  | Not relevant | Blackwork, geometry, ornamental, craftsman |
| Will          | Rotterdam               | Belgium           | 3 years    | Not relevant | Indigenous tattooing, craftsman            |
| EmiCarlitos   | Rotterdam/Guest spots   | Italy             | 10 years   | Female       | Traditional, colour, craftsman             |
| Aida          | The Hague               | Spain             | 15 years   | Female       | Blackwork, fine line                       |
| AnneSally     | Wormerveer / The Hague  | Netherlands       | 5 years    | Not relevant | Neotraditional, colour                     |
| Junior        | Wormerveer/ Guest spots | Brazil            | + 20 years | Male         | Japanese and Chinese designs, craftsman    |
| Bart          | Rotterdam               | Netherlands       | 10 years   | Male         | Blackwork                                  |
| Daan          | Rotterdam               | Belgium           | + 20 years | Male         | Oriental, traditional                      |
| Gihan         | Utrecht                 | Netherlands       | 4-5 years  | Male         | Mix traditional, fine line and realism     |
| Mako          | Utrecht / The Hague     | Netherlands       | 3 years    | Non binary   | Hand poke, black work and colour           |
| Ernesto       | The Hague               | Brazil            | + 20 years | Male         | Traditional, anime designs, diverse styles |
| Maura         | The Hague               | Netherlands       | 5 years    | Female       | Ornamental, bold lines                     |
| Dima          | The Hague               | Ukraine           | 3 years    | Male         | Micro realism, fine line, shading          |

Figure 8. Data distribution. Author creation.

The aforementioned table shows that the 43% of the subjects identify themselves as men, the 32% as women, the 6% as non binary and the missing 19% of the sample agreed on not identifying themselves with any gender, so the answer provided by them was saved as Not relevant. This gender diversity is not common in tattoo studies, given that it has been traditionally labelled a male dominated field. In that sense, I profited from my sample and give more relevance to gender identities. In terms of the styles, it varies from one to another as this category is defined by them in their experience with the field. Nevertheless, the style craftsman signifies that the tattoo artist is open to do any type of request that may come to the tattoo shop as they consider their profession as a craftsmanship where the artist work for the client rather than strictly for their own design taste. This is also observable in the results as one of the roles tattooers have during their working experiences, together with tattoo artist and tattoo worker. In terms of the experience, the range goes from 3 years till 25 years of experience doing tattoos, the table only display approximate timeframes. Those big differences in terms of the years of experience also provide with diversification, perceivable in the way artists relate to tattoo conventions.

In terms of validity, I tried to provide with a rigorous methodology that aligns with the research question. The amount of data meets the requirements of Erasmus University. The interview guide was designed taking into consideration the respect of values, beliefs and experiences of tattoo artists. The definition of questions was based on a rigorous literature review which also helped to defined the chosen methodology. This study was carefully carried out to conduct interviews in a consistent manner to minimize variability and ensure and homogenous participation. All the participants consent for the use of their information in a verbal and written manner, a physical proof of this consent is carefully stored. The iterative process of interviewing and analysing made the last interviews a few minutes longer. I became more aware of how to create communication channels with the interviewees as the process advanced. Nonetheless, this does not alter the reliability of the study. As such, the methodology can be employed for future purposes with similar subjects.

## 4. Results section

The construction of a professional identity in the tattoo world is a complex and dynamic process. The literature review pointed out that there is an important relevance on the personal experiences on any occupation, specially in the arts and culture field. The tattoo world is a reflection of this connection between personal and professional experiences. This has been evident after analysing the testimonies of several tattooers residing in the Netherlands. The results consist of three chapters, the first one is Socialization “Ink in the skin, marks of understanding” and provides with an overview of how artists internalize norms, practices and values while exercising the tattoo practices. The second one refers to “Learning process, skin as an canvas” where I delve into the relevance of educational experiences. By means of apprenticeship, self learning process or peers learning, tattooers develop certain skills and values which end up by defining their working identities. Finally, in the last chapter “Gender identities”, I analyse the responses of tattooers regarding their gender, their clients, their conceptions of masculinity and femininity and the contestation of gender stereotypes in their professional experiences.

### 4.1 Socialization “Ink in the skin, marks of understanding”

#### 4.1.1 Aesthetics, reflection upon a non tattooed artist

Heavily tattooed artists difference from their customers in the sense that they need to a much lesser extent to justify their tattoos to other members of society. This is due to a social stereotype where tattoo artist are assumed to be tattooed. In that sense, their profession links to their aesthetics as if is part of their identity. At this regard, I formulated a question to confront them towards the idea of a non tattooed peer. The majority of the subjects were keen to agree with the statement “A tattoo artist must have tattoos” as they believe tattoos are a reflection of the artist passion, empathy and commitment with the craft. This links to the idea of tattooing observed as a empathetic ritual of kind and affectual sociability (Broome, 2015).

Nonetheless, the testimonies from the subjects that favoured the statement, are different on the degree of rejection of a non tattooed peer. What is specially interesting is the relationship between the way the profession was learnt and the notion of visual aesthetics. For artists that have more experience, or artists that had to complete an apprenticeship in their professional career, being tattooed is a fundamental part in the identity construction. In fact, several mentioned that the usual path for a tattooer career starts when they tattoo their bodies. Therefore, stating that it is the passion towards the tattoo what influence them to join the craft. In that sense, one of the subjects with more than 20 years of experience expressed that

tattooing resides between two spectrums and it is only possible to tattoo once, someone has already experienced it. One can observe in the following statement the emotions that surged with the idea of a non tattooed peer.

“So if you only know one side, how can you tell people? Or how can you do tattoos to people? You don't know everything. I mean, if you don't have an intention to know both sides, then you have no right to tattoo, it's not a drawing, it's not a paper. It's a human. Fucking disrespectful”. (Horikichi).

Other reason of disagreements with a non tattooed peer is that it reflects certain lack of professionalism. Several tattooers manifested not be able to trust someone who has no tattoos, therefore, not considering the chance of getting tattooed from someone without them. Not having tattoos could be observed as Fiona puts it: “A form of disinterest in the whole craft itself” which for passionate members of the occupation is an attack to the traditional conventions of the field.

On the other hand, 3 out of 16 tattooers considered that tattoos are not necessary for a tattooer identity. One of the reasons was that the quality of an artist should be assessed based on the portfolio rather than aesthetics. Identity construction is not an unilateral process of conformity, in that sense, professionals negotiate adaptations to pre established professional norms and values (Caza et Creary, 2016). The new tattooers in this study are considered the ones who have 5 or less years of experience. They, even though are heavily tattooed, challenge these traditional notions of tattooers aesthetics. For them as the narratives show, professionalism is not observable through aesthetics but rather is function of personal expertise and skills.

Testimonies regarding what is considered a professional conduct in the tattoo world are also slightly related to the tattooer aesthetics. This is due to the link between being tattooed and the empathy toward the clients pain and experience. In that sense, several tattooers claim that understanding the client pain management is one of those skills that are acquired through professional experience but also through the experience of being tattooed. There is a dependence of the artist on the client, because his canvas and the client are unified, the relationship client-artist is intimately connected (Barbour, 2013).

At this regard, one of the subjects claimed to change her perspective in this regard. When her tattoo career started she never thought that there was a plausible relationship between an artist aesthetics and the quality of their job. Regardless, after she got a tattoo from



a non tattooed artist, she expressed to had a bad experience. She stated that her pain management was high in comparison to her friends and clients. However, when being tattooed, she felt a lack of care from the tattooer because of his technique and the use of dry elements to clean the affected area. InkEliza at the end of the reflection said: “I would never go back, its better to know how it works before tattooing someone”.

#### 4.1.2 Taste and legitimization

This section surged from the constant claim of the interviewees about how taste shape their aesthetical decisions. When ask about the meaning of their tattoos most of the artists were keen to answer that there is a multitude of reasons. Tattoos are used as aesthetic feature, as a memory, in the form of diary, for commemorating someone special, as a friendship or even just because. Nonetheless, two answers prevailed among the others in relation to the professional identity of the subjects. The first one was that tattooers get tattoos as social interaction with colleagues, this idea will be addressed in the following chapter. The second one is that the tattoos reflect the taste of tattooers, and also the evolution of that taste.

A particular example is the case of Will, who testified that his interest revolves around “indigenous tattooing around the world, which has evolved throughout centuries and is a big part of the cultural aspects in some communities around the world. And it is slowly disappearing. So, I find it very interesting to trace back where it came from, and what it means”. His tattoo designs were inspired by this particular interest in traditional forms of tattooing. But, not only that. He embodied this taste and respect by displaying it around his body. His experiences as a tattooed person are part of a big project that he calls body suit. It is defined by one concept for his whole body, this goes from his ankles to his neck. A process that he calls a “full experience that requires commitment from the tattooer and the tattooed person”. The project is a co-creation with his colleague who also was his tutor during his apprenticeship. The design is tribal inspired that takes elements form traditional indigenous tattooing cultures around the world. Therefore, a clear embodiment of his taste and professional expertise.

Other example of how taste influences the professional identity of the tattooer is the case of Ernesto and his tattoo shop with an anime thematic. After several years of experience in traditional tattoo spaces, he decided to open his own shop. One of his reasons is that traditional tattoo spaces scare people that have different tastes. In that sense, he wanted to create a space for those with similar tastes that him. As a fervent follower of Japanese anime and manga he stated:

“We are combining like two things, I was like at trying to make tattooing more interesting. So I changed my techniques, I learn to do other different tricks apart from the usual traditional ones. I can also work with stuff that I can connect to, with these people I can have all these nerdy talks, that it's very cool”. (Ernesto).

The aforementioned quote shows several events. The initial link shows a relationship between personal taste and professional development. As such, Ernesto find in the specificities of the things he likes a way to differentiate his style. By doing so, he creates a new space for people who, as him might feel uncomfortable in traditional tattooing environments. His endeavours prove that tattooing is reaching new unexplored audiences with different perspectives towards the ink engravings. A public that is moved by popular culture and more close empathetic experiences. Furthermore, artists engage in social learning processes to acquire specific knowledge and skills (Caza et Creary, 2016). Accordingly, Ernesto develops new skills to cope with his new audience demands.

## 4.2 Learning process “Tattoo as an empathetic medium for interaction”

### 4.2.1 Starting point of the tattooing career

Several interviewed tattooers have pointed out that their learning process began in relationship with a tattoo. At this regard, several tattooers pointed out that after their first tattoo experience, they knew they wanted to follow that path. Others, claimed to be excited after visualizing the first tattoo. In the words of Spaceman “I just started going by tattoo shops getting tattooed. I don't know, it's I think most people have this strange attraction to tattooing. Like when they first notice it, they asked themselves what is this like?”. Other subjects also agreed with that statement. AnneSally and Fiona decided to become tattoo artists once they encountered a tattoo in their lives. Independently of the which of the several was, a tattooing experience may define the future career of an artist.

The following graph shows the distribution between tattooers that started from home and the ones who were introduced to the field by the means of an apprenticeship. It shows that the majority of the subjects start their career by tattooing from home. However, several subjects follow a professional apprenticeship as a further step in their professional careers.

Table 9.

| First tattoos         | Distribution |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Self taught from home | 50%          |

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Apprenticeship    | 44% |
| Do not mention it | 6%  |

Table 9. Distribution subjects on their beginning in the tattoo world.

The last graph compares traditional ways of acquiring technical knowledge in the career of the artist. However, there are other ways to do this. In particular, by getting tattooed, the artists learn the dynamics of the shop, how to deal with customers, techniques, pain management and endurance. This is an engaging process of producer-consumer practices.

Other new ways of learning are depicted by less experienced tattooers, in this regard Dima narrates his learning process in the following script:

“My girlfriend learned by herself just watching YouTube and reading on the internet. She has been like self-learned and she showed me after, so after that half year experience, she taught me, it's been super easy for me even though uh, I didn't train before or draw before. I've just been a creative person” (Dima).

#### 4.2.2 Apprenticeship

The 80% of the sample participants had to endure an apprenticeship during their professional careers. The apprenticeship is a mode of learning where the students gets introduced by a tutor for a length in the range of 1-4 years. Besides, only 3 tattooers did not follow this career path. They all consent on the importance of the apprenticeship for the understanding of the field and the learning of tacit and specific knowledge. Apprenticeships are also a process of endurance where the tattooer has to prove itself. In that sense, their professional conduct is observable through the expertise and internalization of the tattoo conventions. This expertise is measured by the techniques a tattooer has to possess in order to perform the job. One of those relevant skills defined by the interviewees is drawing. In particular, some tattooers claimed that tattooing utilizes a different material. Hence, the skin cannot be observable as paper, carton, walls, rock, or other materials used by artists. One would have to learn how to draw for tattooing purposes, therefore, the skill of drawing on flat surfaces is not sufficient to become a tattooer. It is necessary to learn how to use the skin as a canvas. Drawing is therefore one of the first task an apprentice has to endure. Some of them have to draw on a daily basis to get to an adequate level of proficiency.

Accordingly, the subjects refer to several struggles in the acquisition of that technical knowledge. For instance, Daan manifested that he needed “15 years of practice to draw a decent dragon”. InkEliza also mentioned that in order to get a position in a tattoo studio, an

interview was required. The owner of the studio, a tattooer with more than 20 years of experience asked her to draw something tattooable on the spot.

The apprenticeship is a space where the values are taught through observation and practice. One of those conventions learnt by tattooers is the permanency of tattoos in the skins and the use of specific techniques. In this regard, Spaceman manifest:

“Since Covid actually like the past three, four years, people are just doing everything that we know doesn't work. And it takes you 5 to 10 years for this tattoo to heal, settle and then for the the wearer and for the tattooer to realize, oh it's not that permanent. It's shit” (Spaceman).

Putting it in comparison to more modern perspective, artists justify their style selection by saying that consumers are aware of the risks when getting the tattoos. Tattooers are force to provide with a quality service that fulfil the needs of the customers (Glynn, 2017).

“So yeah, actually the micro is more, uh, risky to make on your body. Because, um, then more small, more chance to lose them in the future. So, uh, usually people know it or, um, they don't really care about how it'll look. So what I like in my style, they look super cool, at first, like just an end of the session and after, after a couple years, they still look well, they just lose a bit of details, so it work like our memory” (Dima).

Tattooers are required to engage in practices of collaborative process with their clients (McDade, 2022). In that sense, they have the responsibility of providing a quality work and a enjoyable experience. Nonetheless, the conceptions of permanency will mark a huge difference in client interaction as one tattooer will definitely do a request while the other will consider it unprofessional.

#### 4.2.3 Self tattooing

There are different reasons why a tattoo artist will use his/her own skin to make a tattoo. Nonetheless, it seems to come from an empathetic point of view in most of the cases. Usually, the own skin is used as a model of practice in the firsts years of learning to avoid the harm of clients or friends. It is a common believe for the interviewees that tattooing is an exciting activity that can trigger strong emotions as such as, joy, anxiety, nervousness, fear and satisfaction. By tattooing on themselves, the artists manifested a lost of pain due to higher

levels of concentration, besides, a good experience to learn appropriate technical knowledge. Such is the statement of Inkeliza in which she explains that pain was mostly unnoticed.

“When I'm doing it in myself, I'm not thinking about the pain to be honest but more focusing on my work. So, for instance, I knew that this was a pretty painful area, but I couldn't feel pain during tattooing myself to be honest. It's a good experience, I tried because you can check how to work with the needles, if you should go a little bit more deep or no, so it's better to try”. (InkEliza)

InkEliza was referring to a 15cm tattoo that she made on the front part of her lower leg. More specifically, the tattoo was mostly placed over her tibia or shin bone. This is usually considered as a high pain area by tattooers. The way the tattooers refer to the pain management varies from one subject to another, however, tattooing its own skin seems to be a normal practice among them. This is a bit surprising as inflicting pain on oneself body is a hard task to carry. This practice was associated with several values among the interviewees. For instance, Bart stated that one of the reasons why he tattooed his leg was because he was trying a new technique that can be quite harsh for his customers.

“So I don't really go for huge designs where I put in a lot of time and detail on my own. It's more like I try out stuff. So I have, like that my leg is sort of blacked out because I do a lot of, well I did a lot of blackouts on people and it's, it's really hard and really painful” (Bart)

Tattooing is seen as a form of social interaction rather than a mere exchange of services for an economic interest. In that sense, tattoo artists engage in practices such as tattooing themselves due to the need of understanding the other's experience. Accordingly, tattooing becomes a way of knowing the other based on the interaction with the body, the expressions and the feelings (Broome, 2006). This practice is more common during the beginning of their careers as there is a fear of making mistakes in someone else skin. In that sense, the artists prefer to risk their own bodies rather than making an ugly tattoo on a friend or a customer.

On the other hand, the tattoos that are performed in the artist own skin serve as a form self learning. This responds to a need of experimentation in the first steps of experiencing the field, tattoo comes from socialization processes and here the artist goes from the paper to the skin (Becker et al, 2021). Moreover, other artists also agree on the possibility of communicating with oneself by tattooing their own skin, it helps you to understand both sides of the spectrum. The pain therefore, becomes an indicator of a well performed practice.

“You can on one hand, while tattooing, feel what you were doing, but you also experienced a level of pain. And it's a fine line. Because when you do a tattoo properly, you know exactly what it feels like it has a certain degree of pain” (Will).

It is important to mention that the sketching process is relevant in this situation but also the way the tattoo heals. The tattoo artists are usually not strictly linked with the healing process of their customers as this is not considered a medical procedure, hence, the tattooed subjects do not always communicate this with the artist. Therefore, the only way to assess the outcome is by a self-tattooing practice. Besides, the aesthetic aspect of the tattoo loses importance in comparison to the learning insights. At this regard, Fiona mentions that tattooing on her own skin was a task from her tutor in the shop where she was apprenticing.

“I had to I think try to put some colour in. That was my assignment because I did only a few black tattoos. And then that was the beginning of colouring for me. So, he told me to try and put some different colours and see how it heals.”. Fiona

Opposed to the support of the practice, a couple of artists affirmed have never used their skins as a canvas for practicing tattoos. At this regard, Maura stated that her male peers may have tried to influence her during her apprenticeship. However, she conceived that the practice was against her values and her aesthetic preferences. At this regard, another subject commented that there is no need to tattoo yourself if fake skin and customers are interested in your designs. In his experience, he offered free tattoos at the beginning of his career to what he describes as students or people interested in free tattoos rather than high quality inscriptions.

In summary, tattooing its own skin might be an intent to break those barriers of insecurity of the new profession. Ethnographic research has shown that performing the first tattoos are a scary moment in someone's professional life (Mabry, 2021). Artists that are extremely concerned about a possible negative outcome at the beginning of their careers often practice on themselves to boost their confidence. In their testimonies, experienced tattooers link this practice to the tattooer values by stating that “one cannot do something to someone without experienced it before”.

## 4.3 Gender Identity

### 4.3.1 Gender profile

The sample chosen for the development of this particular research had as an objective the reach of audiences not totally explored before. In particular, the sample gathered the experiences of 5 women, one person identified as non binary and 3 people that do not identify

with any gender. Their testimonies have given important insights to the research. On a first glance, the majority of the subjects were working in spaces with women participation. More specifically, only one studio was composed by only male workers. On the contrary, a couple of studios have only one male working in comparison to 4 and 15 women. This gender distribution is clearly against the traditional conception of the masculine tattoo shop.

Furthermore, all the tattooers manifested to have a diverse clients distribution in the gender dichotomy. However, the degree in which clients are distributed changed depending on the artists and the tattoo style. In this regard, Horikichi and Daan, expressed to have a bigger audience in the male spectrum of gender, attributing this phenomena to the style they have mastered. The style in both cases is related towards a more traditional type of tattooing. On the other hand, Mako and AnneSally have highlighted a clear pattern on clients that come from other genders outside of the male-female spectrum. In particular, AnneSally mentioned that she does not have clear why her style is popular among these audiences. However, it is pleased that they appreciate her tattoo style. Mako, has a different perspective towards this stating that being trans opens up a door for queer people because a relationship of understanding is created. Accordingly, others subjects mentioned that queer people might be accessing other tattooers where they could make a more closer connection. For instance, Gihan reflects upon how his colleague was openly addressing gender issues in social media. He compares then his experience by stating:

“She speaks more to those people. And I think because she tattooed a couple of those people, other people are probably going to see it, or they're going to hear it because they're in the same community. So she is more in that community, so she gets more of those people. And I, I'm getting more people with darker skin tones”. (Gihan).

This reflection proves a strict relationship between some personal features of a tattooer identity and their clients. However, is distant from previous conception of shop clusters. Previous research has shown that tattoo shops were divided into shopfloor cultures, in which tattooers were grouping regarding their particular ethical expectations and social groups (Mabry, 2021). This phenomenon seems to be mutated into a more personal division of labour. Tattooers nowadays, use their personal networks to build clients with similar lifestyles, tastes, ethnicities and in some cases genders while sharing the working spaces with others that distance from them.

In terms of the tattooed body, the interviewees seem to be less likely to accept that their gender is something that can be visualized from their tattoos. That means it is not something they consciously do to reinforce their gender identities. Here is where I find that research has been inconclusive because it has not take into consideration tattooers to assess gender identities in this cultural product. As this research shows, the tattooers seem to not see the connection between both things, contrary to previous academic knowledge on tattooed subjects. The following graph shows the distribution between gender reflection on tattoos and the answers provide by the tattooers.

Table 10.

| Gender connection with tattoos                  | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| No connection                                   | 56%        |
| No reflect the gender                           | 13%        |
| Ambivalent                                      | 13%        |
| Some reflect, others no                         | 6%         |
| Wants to make a tattoo that reflects the gender | 6%         |

Table 10. Reflection of gender in tattoos. Author creation.

In particular, I want to highlight that the only person with the intention of doing a tattoo to reflect his/their gender was Mako. The intention was informed to me due to the interaction with previous customers with queer tattoo request. He mentioned that after a big step in his personal life, he will tattoo his skin. In his words, he expresses:

“So I was actually thinking about maybe a chain breaking lose or something. Um, but right now I don't have anything on my body that kind of represents me who I am as a queer person or a trans person”. (Mako).

I will give space to start the next section where I discuss the reflection of tattooers towards the concepts of masculinity, femininity and the changes on those stereotypes in the tattoo world.



#### 4.3.2 Gender stereotypes and perceivable changes

During the reflection upon gender stereotypes. Tattooers seem to be confused about the meaning of them. I had to explain in most of the cases with an example what that means. I mentioned that a contestation of stereotypes might be when women requests tattoos that the artis could consider masculine. Or in contrary, a male requesting something that could be interpreted as feminine.

In this interaction several artist claimed to have no authority to change a design request from a client. They observed such act as violent towards the person integrity. However, some of them will try to persuade the client if they believe that the design is not completely align with his style. These tattooers engage into a assessment of the person to fulfil its expectations. It is as expressed by them a game between expectations and the delivery they can offer. This difference in the approach is also a constructed convention. As Spaceman notes it, he learnt how to approach such request by engaging into a dissatisfying experience with a customer:

“I definitely know one situation, but it was like, literally 15 years ago, that I told. I told someone that the tattoo was too feminine for how they way they looked. I might have offended the person. And I might have learned from that. Because after that also, I was like asking myself, what does my opinion about that actually, matter? You know, like, even if this person wants a really feminine tattoo, like, who am I to give that opinion, you know, because that comes also again, to the artists and craftsmen”. (Spaceman).

In this interaction it is evident how gender stereotypes have changed over time. The genders as some tattooers manifest are becoming more fluid. Moreover, the traditional values associated to men and women as well. For Bart, women are stronger, and wild in his experience as a tattooer. In his shop he has seen women that endure several hours of blackouts without any complaints. Moreover, women in his experience tend to request darker themes than some men.

The participants have agreed on the observation of cultural changes among their customers and colleagues. The majority has seen an increase not only in the amount of women in tattoo spaces but also in the amount of queer people getting tattoos. According to Pitts (2003, as cited in Klesse, 2007), queer audiences use subjectivity and pleasure to transgress body aesthetics. Besides, body modifications are use as means of someone’s integrity and branding of gender status. When ask to the tattooers about particularities among experiences with people outside the dichotomy of men and women, the tattooers claim that

tattoos are mostly based on a personal taste and not on genderize aesthetics. This contradiction of the postulates of Pitts might be worth to study. However, this research is has not sufficient information to provide conclusive arguments of such phenomena.

In the following section I provide with my final conclusions and a discussion of the results of the former chapter. The discussion aims to motivate others to investigate further on the professional identity of tattooers.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The previous results show a positive relationship between the three components proposed to analyse how the professional identity of a tattooer is built. Tattooing is seen as an intimate and bonding experience. As such, tattooers engage not only on doing tattoos but also on having them. The experience of being tattooed is also a crucial part on their professional development as tattooers. Accordingly, several tattooers claim to decide to tattoo after knowing the tattoo culture. For them being tattooed opens a world, a distinct world where creativity is built on social relations. In their words, tattooing is an act that resides in two spectrums. The importance of knowing both sides is an indicator of professionalism for several interviewees.

Therefore, there is a strict relationship between the tattooed body and the tattooer. This relationship is a convention that comes from the tradition. Tattooing has been executed by tattooed people. This has been evident not only in contemporary western cultures but also in the ancient indigenous communities such as the Māori or the Samoan. Nevertheless, the cultural engagement towards the specific designs has changed dramatically. In ancient times, the tattoos were a definition of status. Nowadays, people seem to be directed by taste and personal decision making. Diverse justification might pop up when asking someone about the reasons behind the tattoos. Commemorating someone, aesthetic purposes, portray its own taste or even for the experience. Nonetheless, tattooers engage in tattooing practices with specific reasons related to their profession. In particular, this study has highlighted two. The first one is to engage with peers, in the exchange of pieces, the tattooers bond and socialize. Several tattooers testified having several tattoos from friends and colleagues or from people they admire.

Moreover, in the start of their careers, tattooers get tattoos to break emotional barriers. This is explained because they need to gain confidence in their own skills. Hence, they use their bodies as a canvas. The tattooers have mentioned that it is also a task carried out to empathize with their customers. They gain technical knowledge by performing this activity. In the narratives, they report to learn about healing processes, new techniques such as blackouts or colouring, needle pressure and pain management. This is also transmitted from tutors to apprentices during their process to learn the profession. Which means is linked to conventions

established in the tattooing culture. Nonetheless, some tattooers with less experience might be contesting these traditional conventions by putting on top their personal aesthetics. In that sense, they aim for the creation of an idealized image that does not have to be disturbed by the learning process. For them, there is always other ways to practice such as fruits, fake skins or even volunteers. This contestation of traditional values is seen in other aspects, for instance the development of new aesthetics linked to consumer needs. Tattooers also diversify and create new proposals linked to gender identities and popular culture. Anime or comic tattoos are getting popular and this is reflected into the aesthetic of shops opening for the portrayal of tastes previously hidden due to stricter conventions.

Besides, the interviewed tattooers do not believe gender could be appreciated through their own bodies. However, they are firm contesters of gender stereotypes when a client asks for it. In their testimonies, they argue that requests that go against traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity are not problematic in their daily work. Instead, they seem to enjoy these new aesthetics from consumers. Which might be also a reflection of how genders in general are becoming more fluid. Into genderized aesthetics that contest stereotypes such as masculinity and femininity.

This research had as a limitation of being structured from a small sample that tends to go towards more experienced tattooers. For future research, I recommend to diversify the sample taking into consideration new tattooers, apprentices, scratchers and non-tattooed artists. I believe the testimonies will change dramatically due to the insights provided by the participants of this research. One concern about the future of the tattooing world is that the concept of permanency is losing relevance. Translated into new techniques that will not survive in the long term, this is due to the loss of the traditional apprenticeship practice. For some tattooers this is translated in the loss of tacit knowledge reflected on tattoos that technically should not exist. Moreover, I suggest the study of new ways of socialization in tattoo shops with particular aesthetics.

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## Appendix A: Interview guide

### Interview guide

#### Introduction:

Good morning, my name is Kevin Ospina. I am currently doing a Master in Arts and Culture for Erasmus University in Rotterdam. For the purpose of my Master thesis, I have decided to conduct semi structured interviews using as a subject tattoo artists which are heavily tattooed. The idea is to gather testimonies to further inquire about identity creation and the relationship between tattoos and the artists.

Before starting the interview, I would like say that I am grateful by your willingness to participate in this research. Besides, I would like to ask for your consent for the use of your information. As you understand, I have to record this interview to later transcribe it and then analyse it. Nonetheless, there is a protocol to follow and that means that all your personal information will be handle following Erasmus University guidelines on data protection. This also means that your personal information will remain confidential.

In that sense, I have this written agreement which I will gently ask you to sign.

Perfect, now we can start.

#### Questions

##### Production side

1. First of all, I would like to know a bit about you. Can you perhaps narrate how was the process to become a tattoo artist?

2. Do you have a tattoo style? How would you describe your productions?

3. What role do you think tattoos have in someone's identity?

4. What are your opinions on the following statement? A tattoo artist must have tattoos.

5. Can you please tell me about the first tattoo you did on someone

6. Have you done tattoos on your own skin? How was the experience like?

7. Have you ever had a client with a request that challenged traditional gender roles or stereotypes? How did you approach that request?

8. Do you feel that the attitudes towards tattoos and gender stereotypes have changed over time? If so, how?

##### Consumer side

9. What was the first tattoo you did and how was the experience behind it?

10. Now, I would like to ask about your last tattoo experience, what differences do you find from the first one in terms of symbolic value, design, experience?

11. How do you identify yourself in terms of gender and sexual orientation?

Optional to answer, you don't have to answer

11.1. Are your tattoos a reflect of what you previously described?

12. What was the inspiration behind your own tattoos?

13. Do any of your tattoos hold a particular meaning that others could identify?

14. Have you experience negative comments or judgements due to your tattoos?

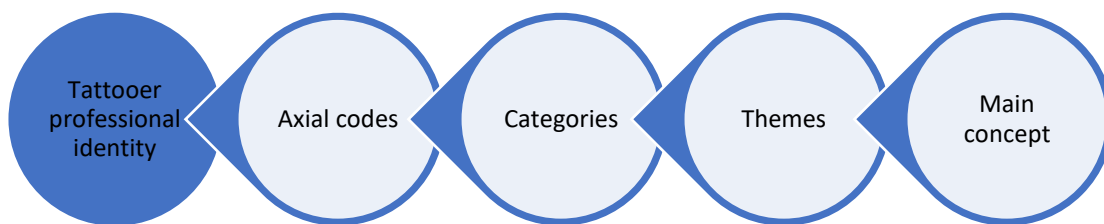
15. Is there any relationship between the tattoos in your own body and the tattoos you do on others bodies?

16. Do you think any of your tattoos might not be consider masculine/feminine by society?

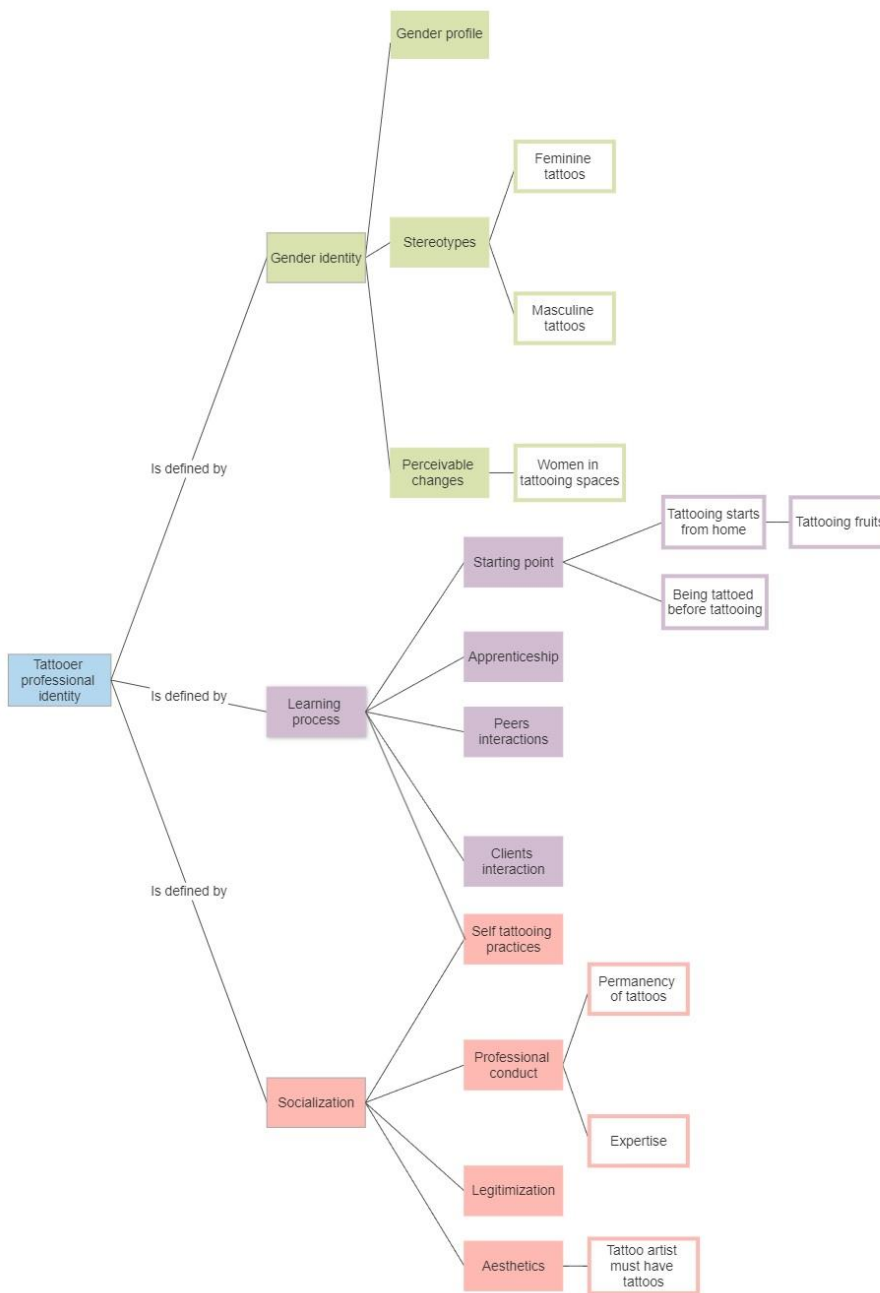
## Appendix B: Code trees

### B.1 Graph of codes organization

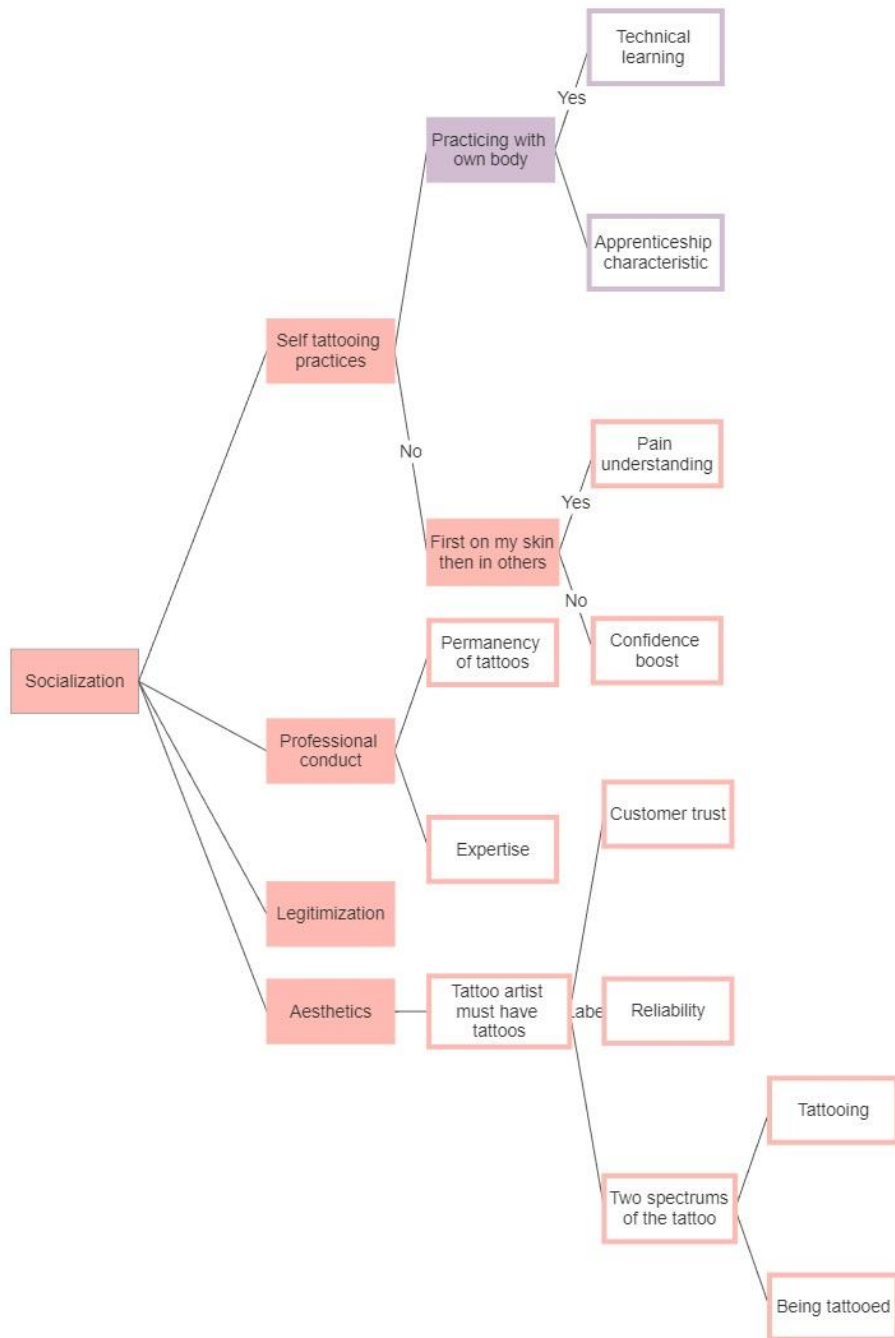
The following graph depicts how the codes are organized in the code trees. As important note, Axial codes and Open codes are represented by a few random codes, chosen from the analysis.



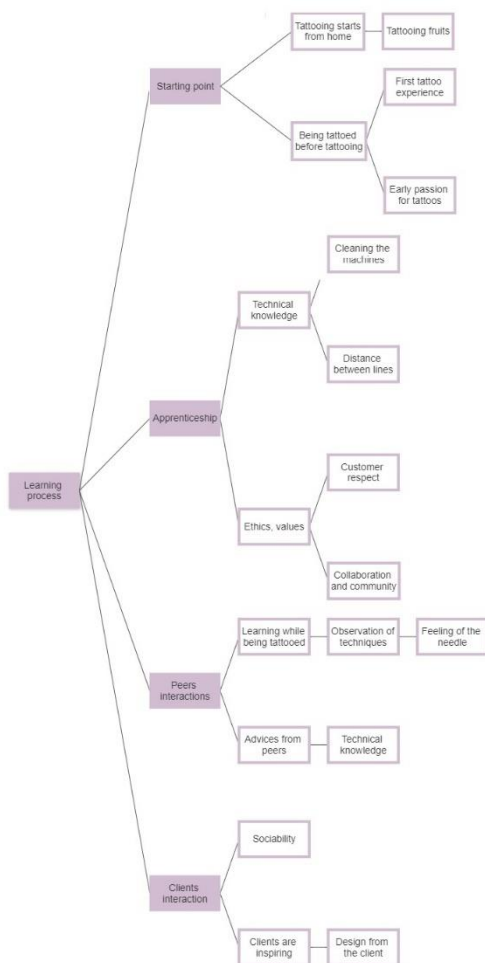
B.2 General Code tree



B.3 Sociability code tree



## B.4 Learning process code tree



### B.5 Gender identity code tree

