The Practise of Tattooing


Tattooist-Customer Relationships in a Diversified Environment of Professional Tattooists and ‘Scratchers’

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Abstract
The world of tattooing and body art has never been like it is today. This chapter seeks to investigate this situation through the lens of tattooing. One of the areas in which tattooing has changed is the relationship between the tattoo artist and his or her clients. Whereas being a tattoo artist used to be impersonal and very much just a job like any other, it has transformed tremendously today. The cause of this and, even more so, what exactly has changed are what this chapter will seek to shed light on. First of all, the format of the shops and how the art is done have changed, which allows for much greater flexibility from the perspective of the artist. Second, from the perspective of the client/customer, a transformation has also occurred, in some part thanks to developments such as the internet and other social/communication media, which give the client much more room and opportunity to discover and research tattoos. However, most importantly, this chapter seeks to map out a change in discourse when it comes to the relationship between the client and the tattoo artist and to explain how it has changed into a relationship based on mutual and reciprocated communication as well as focussed on making a product/piece of art that both can be satisfied with.

Before the Session
Even before the session, a lot has changed within the tattoo world and its mechanics. One of the key elements in the transformation of this process is social media, and particularly the internet [1, pp 97–100; 2, pp 3–6]. The focus here is not on how social media, such as TV shows, movies, and the internet, have helped in spreading the idea of tattoos in modern society as well as making them more commonly accepted; the focus is on how social media has served to help both clients and tattoo artists when it comes to research and preparation [3]. On the part of tattoo artists, the internet has helped them to research more of their craft, to get familiarised with different styles, and perhaps even to improve their own art. However, more importantly for clients, the internet has meant a great deal in terms of how to find the right artist, find the right motif for their tattoo, and find inspiration for their tattoo and has indeed helped to improve the whole experience on many accounts [2, p 3]. This means that both clients and tattoo artists expect a lot more from the planning part of the process. Clients research a lot about styles and different artists, making sure that they find the right guy to help them to achieve their dream tattoo. However, this
also means that artists have started to expect a bit more preparation from their clients, or at least the ones who want a ‘custom piece’, and not just some ‘fashion ink’. The end result of all of this planning often becomes a much more unique tattoo, and the planning will also result in the client reflecting a lot more on the motif that he or she wants for the tattoo and how he or she identifies with it [3]. There has also been a huge proliferation of (social) media that can help the client with this research. There are more and more so-called tattoo self-help books, which explain both the different genres of tattoos and their iconography. Most of them also have a chapter on ‘how to find the perfect tattoo artist for your tattoo’ and so on. This, along with tons of magazines and such, showing off artwork from all over the world, and the internet make sure that people can find an artist from anywhere in the world [1, pp 32–34]. This has made the tattoo artist-customer relationship one that focusses much more on reflection and art from the perspective of both parties [3, p 16]. There is even a much higher level of integrity today, as the tattoo artist may say no to a design if he or she earns enough to decline work and may rather recommend another artist, who might be better suited to meet the client’s needs. Thus, there is more of a common goal and trust from the start. Additionally, the artist’s reputation is much more at stake than it was in the past, as clients can now research the subject with great ease, including the quality of the work done. This means that if an artist short-changes a client or tricks him or her in another way, the artist’s reputation will be ruined, so both parties need to respect each other [3, pp 29–30].

During the Process

When it comes to the process and how the relationship has changed in this regard, much can be said about how the process differs from tattoo to tattoo, especially since some smaller pieces will take a very short time, or perhaps only a few hours or less than one. However, regardless of this, as my previous research has shown [3], there is a much more relaxed and friendly atmosphere during the tattooing process than there was in the past. This, of course, cannot be said for all shops, but for the majority of what one may call ‘modern tattoo shops’, this holds true. This atmosphere makes the trust already established much stronger, and often, the aim is mutual satisfaction with the work being done. Because of that, the artist will often be very focussed on doing his or her best during the process. Especially because of how diversified the tattoo world is, communication between client and artist becomes paramount, as both want to be able to see themselves in the work being done [3, pp 24–25]; the client wants a unique piece that speaks to and about him or her, and the artist wants to put his or her artistic brand into the tattoo, such as a certain style of lines or colouring. This means that often, when a client finds a tattoo artist with the same artistic visions as the client has, the artist will be much more friendly and keen during the project than if the client came in and just asked to have a simple star made of black outlining done. However, all in all, during the process, the relationship between client and artist has transformed into that of comradery. This is not to say that an artist will befriend every client that he or she meets, but there is a lot more openness from the artist’s side, which has played a large part in removing a lot of the stigmas surrounding tattoo shops and the like [1, pp 138–140]. The shop and artist are no longer seen as dangerous and deviant or as things to keep certain wariness about. Instead, the shop is seen as a place where one can come and pour out one’s artistic ideas in a forum where they belong.

The Past and Now

It has already been briefly discussed above, but I would now like to discuss how the relationship between the artist and his or her clients has changed in a bit more of a general and academic sense. Most
importantly, the whole societal context around tattoos has changed; they are no longer condemned to subcultural status or to be markers of deviants or villains. Instead, they have become culturally transcendent; individual; and, as the title of this chapter hints, diversified to a great extent. In line with the theories of Paul Sweetman, the tattoo has become the anchor of the self in late modern society [4]. This is, of course, inspired by the theories of sociologists such as Bauman [5] and Giddens [6], who all see the world as one of constant flux in our late modern society. Nothing is constant or certain like it was back in the time of tradition. Our identities are especially prone to change and transformation throughout our lives. What Sweetman tries to say is that tattoos and similar body art almost serve as a defragmentation of our identity because of how they make us reflect more carefully on ourselves and our identity. It has been discussed whether tattoos provide much individuality, something that artists doubt to an extent [3, pp 25–26]. However, there is great consensus among both clients and artists that what they are doing becomes a part of the wearer’s and the artist’s identities, as it is a piece of the artist’s skills and the history of the artist’s art as well as permanently positioned on another human being’s skin (less so with piercings, yet they can still have a similar effect). Whether a tattooed individual likes it or not, others will view him or her in light of the tattoos whenever the individual carries them visibly. This judgement does not necessarily have to be negative, but it should be considered. Because of this, tattoo artists, and especially the ones with at least some success, often take it upon themselves to be guides for their clients, counselling them on whether they are ready or able to carry the design that they have in mind or whether certain changes should be made for it to work [4, 7]. All in all, the relationship between artists and clients has, for the reasons listed in this chapter, become one of communication and dialogue. It is what marks the relationship more than anything in the modern tattoo/body-art culture. Without dialogue, a tattoo will often not end up as well done or thought out as it could have been, and that will lead to people regretting the tattoo and the artist not really being happy about the work [3, pp 29–30].

Thus, as already said, the paramount element in the modern artist-customer relationship between tattoo artists and their clients is communication/dialogue, with the mutual goal of creating something that will satisfy both parties; however, the focus is usually on the customer.

References