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# THE POACHERS OF INSTAGRAM – TATTOO ARTISTS IN POLAND AND THEIR TACTICS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The rise of social media has had a huge impact on the body modification services market. This study aims to reflect on the transformation of the tattoo community, giving voice to tattoo artists themselves in order to reveal their practices within the digital spaces they operate in, and on this basis, to undertake a broader reflection on users' expectations towards social media in their current form and in the future. In order to achieve this premise, a grounded theory methodology was applied. The results of the study suggest that forms of resistance to platform hegemony, such as alternative social media, would not necessarily address the real needs of tattoo artists and their clients. Tattoo artists, by inventing various tactics of poaching in the polymedia environment, can reap unexpected benefits from the aspects of the platforms that are often perceived as limiting and potentially harmful – such as content selection algorithms.

Keywords: internet, social media, Instagram, grounded theory, affordances, Michel de Certeau

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 2019, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the World Wide Web, as March 12, 1989 can be considered the symbolic beginning of the internet as we know it. The creator of the WWW, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, intended that the topology of the network based on hyperlinking would promote decentralization, support equal access to content and disrupt hegemonic relations of power. In the local context of Poland, the cultural scene of the phenomena described in this article, the beginning of the Internet coincides with the first free elections and the transformation of the social paradigm to democratic and participatory. The next step in the process of this (alleged) shift of power and authority towards users was the introduction of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s – the new paradigm of the active, creative

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producer (Bruns, 2008) was born. Concurrently, a techno-utopian myth of the internet as an egalitarian space of free expression of opinions and support for democratic processes was undermined by researchers who identified alarming trends, such as hyper-personalization and precise targeting of messages based on advanced behavioral and demographic data (Zuboff, 2019), dataism (Barlett, 2018), technological solutionism, and technological determinism (Morozov, 2013). Many scholars and public intellectuals point out that we are living through an unprecedented moment of a great leap in technological development where the profits and risks that derive from it are unequally distributed (Floridi, 2014; Lorenzi and Berrebi, 2019; Mason 2015; Mazzucato, 2013; Rushkoff, 2017). Despite the accusations leveled against social media for their negative impact on democracy and social life, they are a necessity for most in maintaining their professional and social activity, as corporate social media serve as a public infrastructure of communication. This was made even clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the public sphere shrank almost exclusively to online. This article takes a closer look at the experience of users of digital platforms who must navigate or even “poach” in the conditions described above. Their practices and tactics for operating in these media as they are now may reveal their expectations and aspirations for the future of social media. The Polish tattoo community, thriving in recent years primarily on the Instagram platform, will serve as an example.

## 2. BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY AND DATA-COLLECTION PROCESS

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how those in the community of tattoo artists include Instagram in their professional activity. While this study has found many interesting new phenomena in the tattoo industry, the key observations are about tattoo artists’ attitudes towards social media, their expectations of digital platforms, and their ideas about alternatives to them. In the Polish context, tattoos and the tattoo community have mainly been described from the perspective of subculture studies, the sociology of social groups (e.g., Zbyrad, 2015), or in the context of risk behaviors (e.g., Ostaszewski and Kocoń, 2007). Transformational impact of this social media platform in the area of art/body modification practices has been spotted both in popular circuits<sup>1</sup> as well as in academic reflection. In Western societies, social media platforms have forced a change in the existing practices of tattoo artists, such as the way their portfolios are built and presented to the public, but they have also introduced new paths of artistic career-building and have allowed specific styles of tattooing to emerge (Force, 2022; Walzer and Sanjurjo, 2016). This research, which stems from the tradition of ethnographic and cultural studies, also covers the topic of how Instagram has significantly transformed tattooing practices and the tattoo scene in Poland. However, I believe that the surplus value of this study consists of more advanced insights into the interrelationship between the social network and its users, as well as their ideas for

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on this trend in popular culture magazines see for example: <https://www.nylon.com/articles/instagram-influence-tattoo-culture> [3.05.2022].

taming, domesticating and benefiting from this platform. The study will explore examples of bottom-up attempts of taking control of the data and the dynamics of a given medium, as well as grassroots ideas on how to capture and extract profits from a corporate platform.

The study includes five in-depth interviews with tattoo artists, conducted using a grounded theory approach, where theorizing follows empirical data. The choice of this research method was motivated by the belief that it is the participants themselves in a given social situation who can provide the right insight into it (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and February 2022. The group of interviewees consisted of one man, three women and one person identifying as non-binary; four of them were in their mid-20s, and the other was over 40. For all of them their professional career development coincided with the rise of social media and Instagram's gaining status as the medium of choice for tattoo artists, which dates back to around 4–5 years prior, according to their records. In-depth interviews were supplemented with observation of the research participants' Instagram patterns of use. After the data collection stage, the recorded interviews were written down and coded and organized using the thematic analysis method. Recurring topics, motifs and themes were identified to formulate relevant and more general remarks. As a result of the analysis of the collected material and coding, four levels of intertwinement between Instagram and tattoo practice emerged:

- Level 1: Patterns of use of Instagram tools and basic functionalization.
- Level 2: Negotiating positions within the medium and looking ahead.
- Level 3: The new culture of tattooing.
- Level 4: Instrumentalization and targeting: ultimate goals.

Various aspects of these four levels of Instagram use in the context of a tattoo artist's work are discussed in the following sections.

### 3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### 3.1. PATTERNS OF USE OF INSTAGRAM TOOLS AND BASIC FUNCTIONALIZATION – LEVEL 1

The most basic finding from the interviews is that for all interviewees, Instagram is undoubtedly the main and the most important medium in the context of their tattoo work. The Instagram account is their main channel of contact with customers, although three out of five respondents have tried to set up booking systems via other digital or non-digital channels, mainly e-mail. Only one person is consistent in maintaining the e-mail booking system, while the rest have abandoned these attempts because most customers ignore e-mail requests and contact them via Instagram private messages. This may suggest that for customers as well Instagram is the default, most natural or even the anthropotropic (Levinson, 1997) form of contact, as they tend to consider Instagram as an end-to-end service platform, from consideration and selection of offers to after-sale customer service. For tattoo artists, however, this is not an optimal solution – they complain about an excess of messages in their

inboxes, leading to message clutter, difficulty finding conversations and the lack of an option to organize messages. This observation is supported by reoccurring Instastories published by one of the respondents in which they ask clients to re-contact them because they cannot find their conversation in the message box. One person has tried to by-pass the Instagram message box by keeping a parallel non-digital enrollment calendar. Despite these disadvantages, all respondents describe Instagram as a work tool and consider their time spent on using this app as being devoted to professional activity; as one of the respondents put it:

But also I can... close this app and I don't get these notifications – when I go to Instagram, I know I'm in this 'work' mode and then the messages appear, and when I close the app my phone is private for me (INT1, 16–17).

Therefore, their use of Instagram features is subordinate to tattoo work: they follow other tattoo artists to become inspired and publish their projects, sketches and finished tattoos in a form of posts and Instastories, building their professional portfolio within this medium. Only one of the respondents admitted to having a profile on the platform for body-modification professionals. Conversely, none of the interviewees use Facebook any longer in their professional activity, as they consider its users out of their target group (the issue of reaching the right audience will be further addressed in section 3.4) and its visual features as unappealing and incompatible with their content:

Well, and I've also noticed [on Facebook] that it's harder to add photos and to catalog them and they look... A little bit uglier? In the sense that when you open the Instagram app, you have this bio, information, highlights and then you see your feed, and on Facebook you just have this kind of wall and single photos, so you can't take a look at 10 photos, and often these photos together look much better [on Instagram] and more promising than a single photo like that (INT1, 55–59).

So I've been using Facebook I think for two, three years, but more on the basis that I just automatically shared [content] from Instagram to Facebook, but I noticed that, well, so few people came to me from Facebook... that click "share to Facebook", if it gives me so little, then I don't even want to click that, so I just stick with Instagram, also because that I don't want to get distracted, because... I click it and do it in such a very automated way, it shows up on Facebook and somebody is going to, I don't know, maybe comment on it and so on. And I... I'd rather not put anything there than leave people with, you know, some unanswered questions for, I don't know, 13 weeks. So, with Facebook "friendship ended" (laughs) (INT4, 118–130).

Another platform that recurred in the interviews was TikTok. As the most rapidly growing social media platform<sup>2</sup>, its phenomenon has not escaped the attention of tattoo artists. However, only one of the respondents is using it actively; INT1 treats it as a supplement to Instagram, which they use strictly for professional activity:

I've kind of allocated my time from Instagram, which I associate with work, to TikTok, which is for me totally so... Pure entertainment (INT1, 653–655).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/> [6.05.2022].

Other interviewees acknowledge importance of TikTok but are reluctant to use it, as they do not consider the specifics of this medium to be in line with their personal preference and personality; most of them do not even use the Instagram features that emulate TikTok functions, such as Reels. As can be seen, media convergence (Jenkins, 2008) is not always the desired direction of platform development from the perspective of specific user groups who view the medium primarily through the lens of the effectiveness of translating virtual contacts into real economic gain. The types of content, the specific display channels it is published in, reflections on the studied group of users in these practices, and their modes of operation will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.2. NEGOTIATING POSITIONS WITHIN THE MEDIUM AND LOOKING AHEAD – LEVEL 2

As indicated above, Instagram is an essential tool for building a professional and artistic position for all respondents of this research. Therefore, they use its features to establish a portfolio by creating a consistent gallery of posts; at the same time, however, some of them build their online personae with the use of Instagram functions such as Stories to present something more than flashes and healed tattoos. Four out of five interviewees publish content that is not limited to their direct work on tattoos, but also includes private-life information, their personal reflections of a social nature, artistic inspiration, simply entertainment, and educational content explaining a tattoo artist's work from behind the scenes (the importance and consequences of these practices will be further discussed in parts 3.3 and 3.4):

And in terms of the things that I talk about... I very often touch on nonbinary topics, I've had a lot of questions about that, like, well, why do I have a husband, or how to address me, and I've touched on that in these Q&As as well. They can ask anything, but I don't have to answer every question. I wanted [my profile] to be a safe space, not like "oh god, how can you ask that?" No, sometimes I just won't answer, but I count myself lucky that someone will ask a question and that's ok for me because that's the aura I want to create. So I get a lot of questions about my mental health... Because that's how I try to put up with the taboo of going to a psychiatrist or a psychologist. [To show] that it's awesome, taking care of yourself, and when I recently posted a picture of what meds I take, noting that it's from a psychiatrist and all, that medicine is awesome, that this is what allows me to function and get up in the morning, about 20 people responded that they have the exact same prescriptions. And I feel like that makes it [visible to the public], that oh, there's a person who's doing cool things that they like, and they're also taking the medicine that I'm taking. It also makes me feel cool because I feel like I'm not so alienated, that I can see how many people are taking these medications... I would like to see a tattoo artist that I like, that shows that they also have anxiety, or they also have worse days, or they also sometimes get tired of their clients, not because they don't like them, but because they're already mentally exhausted and they want to cancel. Well, so that's cool. I mean, a positive thing (INT1, 475–491).

As shown in the excerpt from the interview above, it seems that exposing private aspects of their experience allows tattoo artists to get closer to their audience. It is also a way of naturalizing this platform by saturating it with vulnerability, vernacular manifestations of creativity, authentic, non-curated expressions of self. Sometimes the intimate content broadcasted on the

artists' profiles intersects with current social or political issues. One interviewee published an Instastory documenting their self-induced pharmacological abortion as a form of educational content, but also a manifesto, considering that access to abortion in Poland is limited to very specific cases. It is clear that tattoo artists use their profiles as a platform to publicize important topics and transform their reach into social action.

Well, I use it a little bit to highlight some social issues, and I combine topics of politics with tattoos and pictures of my dog... So, it's just, you know, a subjective selection of topics, some more specific, I don't know, trends, and... Well, I often publish things that my friends, activists, are involved in, so those topics that affect me more are given priority. I also sometimes share some fundraisings that my clients or followers ask me to, but not all of them, unfortunately... (INT4, 51–55).

I'm trying not to post any super personal stuff, but it's a matter of fact that I just don't like talking to the camera, I don't like talking about my life... but I like posting funny pictures, for example when I see something that makes me laugh, or when I see an anti-abortion van, I always have to submit it because it drives me crazy and I hope that someone will see it and react... (INT5, 283–288).

Two of the respondents have adopted a different strategy for operating on Instagram, professing the principle that what primarily shapes their personal brand and artistic standing is their artwork:

I rather rely on such a system which simply consists of publishing works and showing my own person in the public space as little as possible. This means that I have always wanted the people who come to me and observe what I do to focus mainly on my work. So that there wouldn't be, as brutal as it sounds, this human factor that could somehow suggest or favor my person to some people... So that this work... would defend itself (INT2, 11–18).

But I also like to do this [post artistic inspiration content], only when it's not very personal. I don't, for example, tell about what I do, who I am, I mean, I don't reveal my privacy, my emotionality, I admit that I like how others do it, but I can't afford it, no... Maybe it's a matter of being from the old school which taught me to think that my work says the most about me... (INT3, 254–259).

No matter to what degree the interviewees reveal their personal traits, they all share a common tactic of personalizing their experience of using Instagram in a way that is most convenient and valuable to them, in order to negotiate their position within this medium. One of the aspects of this approach is domesticating the medium and making it a safe space to enable comfortable, efficient operations, for example, by turning off the notifications or unfollowing or blocking users whose activity is troublesome. Another example of Instagram personalization is 'hacking' the default features to adapt them to the needs of the artists – the most evident example of this tactic is using Stories Highlights to sort and catalog their content into categories, such as 'sketches', 'flashes', 'healed works', 'FAQs' or 'bookings'. Two of the interviewees created separate profiles dedicated solely to the purpose of archiving finished tattoo works or presenting other forms of their artistic activity.

Being aware that they have to operate outside of their sphere, where they do not have a full grasp of the rules, tattoo artists demonstrate a strong awareness of Instagram policies

and algorithmic logic; in each of the five interviews the topic of algorithmic culture and the social and personal consequences of Instagram's business model emerged:

It's widely known that Instagram is not made to support my joyful creativity, it's made to, well, to monetize me and my followers and clients... Instagram just, well, treats me like a hamster on a wheel: It's fine as long as I'm working my butt off, you know, I'm posting a lot of stories, some 'clickable' stuff and so on, but when I don't want to do that, I know that I'm going to be sent somewhere at the end of the line as punishment, and that these algorithms will put me somewhere far away (INT4, 148–153).

In order to strike a balance between the desire to comply with (implicit or even obscure) algorithmic regulations and the need to preserve one's own identity and to be able to express oneself freely, a tattoo artist has to adopt the attitude of a poacher condemned to seek cracks in the dominant structure and invent specific tactics to extract benefits out of a system that is primarily exploiting their affective work. The cultural practice of poaching, the term first introduced by Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, 1984) and later developed by, among others, Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2012), initially referred to the practice of reading as habituating literary texts, but it may also be used as a vehicle of understanding the attitudes that Instagram users take towards this medium. To illustrate it by referring to de Certeau's words, one could try replacing the word "reader" with "user", "author" with "platform", and "text" with "medium":

A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own "turns of phrase," etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29).

That is what tattoo artists do by consciously shaping their profiles and developing individual practices for operating within the medium. In some cases, it takes a form of contesting the mainstream, dominant aesthetics and choosing to resist the "best practices" promoted by the platform's creators for account maintenance; it is also backed up by their reflections on the overabundance of content on Instagram that they don't want to put their hand to:

I feel like I'm shirking the algorithms a bit... I know how to pump it up, but I don't really have the energy for it. I also know that you need make these stories very often, so that they keep firing up, refreshing, but I have a problem with the fact that, for example, I have nothing to say or show, so I ask myself 'why the hell should I write this story?'. And this is also the issue of contribution to this Instagram junkyard and littering the interpersonal space, to this constant pushing at people and fighting for their attention. It's also problematic for me that there's this growth principle, that you have to grow to not disappear (INT3, 288–295).

No, no, no, [I] never [used paid promotion], although I was criticized for that by my friends, also for that I didn't use even such simplest forms [of promoting content] as hashtags because what I cared about most was this pragmatic side (INT2, 525–527).

No, I don't do anything like that [paid promotion] (laughs). Sometimes I don't even add captions to these photos, so in general it's... maybe I don't pay attention to it, maybe I don't need it much... as much as I have, it's enough for me, for me it's also fun, and it's great that I don't have to stress about it, that... I don't know, I think that when it comes to tattooing and the tattoo world, I think a lot of people want to have a tattoo and it's, like, one would have to really don't post anything on Instagram and just sit in their room and, like, don't post anything and turn Instagram off to make people stop requesting [about a tattoo]... So no, I don't do things like that, well, I was wondering if maybe I should do something like that, but I rather was wondering if there was maybe another way, maybe besides this paid promo and besides these hashtags... It seems to me that, I don't know, I know what I like and sometimes when I see that people are so 'over-' and they promote themselves too much, it turned me off them. I don't feel encouraged because I feel that it's some kind of advertisement and I hate advertisements because they are everywhere... (INT5, 199–220).

As seen in the example above, in the field of tattoo work, content that is over-curated and too polished may not comply with the aesthetic preferred both by tattoo artists and their clients. But the practices of Instagram poachers consist not only of acts of resistance against the hegemonic power of the platform; there are also acts of willing sacrifices and “rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's”:

I upload an Instastory every day... even when I was going on vacation, and I wanted to be offline. I uninstalled Instagram so I wouldn't be tempted, but once a day I uploaded an Instastory, just so I wouldn't have to revive my account later, and then I uninstalled it again. So Instastory is a must, it's a last resort, if you don't publish an Instastory within 24 hours, then you can see right away that you must put in a lot of work to get back to some decent level [of reach] (INT4, 225–231).

So Instagram is also a psychological trap: it kind of gives me instant gratification when a post is liked and there are positive comments, but it also makes me sad or sorry if I post something that I think is great and it doesn't get any response. And for me it's emotional work to do with myself to separate these things, so that Instagram doesn't have such a drastic influence on my psychological life, and as I said, it gives me a lot but it also takes a lot. I mean, it [Instagram] wants a lot from me and it wants to get its hands on a lot of aspects of my life. So it's a give and take situation. It lets me work and reach out to people, but it also demands a lot for that (INT3, 373–381).

From the above interview excerpts the following picture emerges: Instagram as a field of continuous renegotiations of users' positions and the invention of tactics to strike a balance between submission and resistance. The interviewees consider their activity within the medium in transactional terms, where some investments or expenses (both in a literal and figurative sense) have to be made in order to achieve the intended effect; this effect, securing continuity of tattoo session appointments and thus financial security, will be further discussed in part 3.4.

Having presented some examples of how users attempt to tame Instagram's hegemonic ambitions and juggle between adapting to its rules and developing their own practices for operating within the medium, the final part of this section briefly discusses tattooists' reflections on alternatives to this platform, desired directions for change in its functioning, and contingency plans in the event of changes in the media platform landscape.

Even though the in-depth interviews were generally loosely structured, at some stage respondents were asked about alternative media to run their business, specifically whether

they had heard of an emerging Polish platform dedicated to tattoo artists.<sup>3</sup> Views on this idea vary, but opinions expressing doubt over creating such a platform prevail:

I think there are already two apps, I know one app and it offered me an access to it for tests, and I also found another one. But I don't get it... I think that it probably wouldn't work. I don't like it that way. When I tried to use those two apps, it's like... Instagram encourages me to spend time there because I can see more than just tattoos there, I can see other things too, I can check out a person holistically, not just through tattoos. And if I saw a profile limited to tattoos only, I don't know whether I would dare to sign up for a tattoo with that person. Like, it doesn't give me that certainty that this person will be cool. What else, like, I don't know, I go to make an appointment for nails and I see that person has done so many nails, cool feedback, ok – I can go. However, this is a tattoo, something more intimate (INT1, 910–925).

And I thought to myself that it might not be stupid to do something like that [a platform dedicated to tattoo artists], although on the other hand the fact that it's all connected to each other [on Instagram] is interesting, because, I don't know, it seems to me that nowadays every new application or website, like Facebook or Instagram and everything, every portal, everything is there, there must be more and more [features], this TikTok thing... If there's nothing happening on it, then people stop being interested in it at all, so I don't know if, when it comes to this tattoo world, if that wouldn't also be cutting yourself and other users off some space. Because there are people who draw and have just started tattooing and, for example, tattooing is for them just some kind of... it's not a job, they do it once every two weeks and it's cool for them... But... it should be available to people too. I like to browse through these accounts sometimes, look at the stuff, I actually rarely check on tattoo accounts, I follow painters, graphic designers or totally different things, but it's a matter of my interests, but it's interesting that there's access to different things, not just tattoo artists (INT5, 42–54).

As presented in the excerpts above, tattoo artists perceive Instagram's content diversity as an asset of Instagram which allows them to get inspiration from artistic creations other than tattoos, but also to place tattoo work in a broader context of artistic creation as such and present the background of the personality of the tattoo artist himself; the rise of this holistic approach to tattoo process, not limited to the tattoo itself, will be discussed in part 3.3. Going back to the examples above, again, an interviewee points out a characteristic feature of Instagram, namely convergence and progressive resemblance of their functionalities. Universalization of these functionalities, entailing an abundance of messages and content, becomes a standard for social media users, which may indicate that a social medium limited to a narrow group of people and topics (e.g., tattoo artists) may not gain much popularity. In terms of the future of social media, this insight suggests that alternative platforms, centered around specific topics, succumbing to the illusion of the apparent effectiveness of precise targeting, may not necessarily meet the needs of their designed users. The variety of topics, styles and aesthetics on Instagram allows tattoo artists to find their niche and gather an audience that shares the same values or artistic taste (more about targeting the right audience will be presented in part 3.4):

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<sup>3</sup> The specific name of this platform was not introduced by the interviewer so as not to inhibit the spontaneous response of the interviewees; the abovementioned online service for tattoo artists is INKsearch.co. None of the respondents had any extensive knowledge about this tool.

Oh, okay, I think I heard about this app, but I don't remember [the name]. Well, there are couple of these big accounts on Instagram that run tattoo portals or tattoo review sites... It could be useful tool for tattoo artists who, I don't know, do everything... there's a huge percentage of the clientele that doesn't have a certain style that they like, or doesn't have a tattoo artist that they like, and I think those portals will be dedicated to those people so they can figure out who to hit, or just to do research. But I have, I don't know, such a specific style and such a specific clientele that I would function on such a website as some kind of a freak or an account that nobody visits because I don't think there's a broader, general demand for the kind of tattoos that I do (INT5, 391–405).

Although tattoo artists appreciate Instagram as a place of opportunities for their business, they are also aware of its fragility and the risk of losing an account due to either privacy policy issues, technical breakdowns or some more general shifts of power on the social media market; some of them have prepared contingency plans for account or application problems:

Well, it [operating exclusively on Instagram] is also kind of risky from the point of view that these accounts are rarely blocked, but they still are. Well, I'm aware that this can also happen to me in spite of the two-step verification process, so it would make my work a bit more difficult, but on the other hand, that's why I'm glad that I have these records on my e-mail, because if it happened, I'd have an archive of, I don't know, 1,000 or 3,000 people on my e-mail, to whom I would write an e-mail saying that, well, "I lost my account, I invite you to another one" and in this case I would have some contact with this lost 'community' and it's important to have some diversification of the ways of reaching clients, because it seems to me that if there are tattoo artists who have everything on Instagram, like a booking system and so on, well, they'd have a problem. And so, well it's just, this awareness of being dependent on a monopolist is a bit of a downside here, because these accounts are blocked sometimes for no reason at all (INT4, 413–413).

Between employees, we have this app that worked for me when there was that shutdown, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook and everything, we use Signal... We started [using it] earlier than [the Facebook shutdown], but as the breakdown happened, I was already convinced and I was glad to have another communicator for company matters. If Instagram were to kind of fall apart now, I wouldn't have the ability to communicate with my clients, but I can communicate with the people I work with. So that's very important to me (INT1, 77–79, 583–586).

Considering the above examples, it seems that even though Instagram is the central activity terminal for their work, tattoo artists function in a wider polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2012). These media offer various communicative opportunities and affordances (Gibson, 1979) from which users choose and shift between, depending on their objectives and needs. They also express their dissatisfaction with certain features that they would welcome Instagram's removal of, such as a visible number of followers that puts them under pressure or an overabundance of content that creates a feeling of being inundated, not allowing them to break through with their message and content.

Despite preparing 'B plans' and securing backups for possible shutdowns, interviewees see the possible demise of Instagram as a liberating vision; when INT1 asked about their feelings in reaction to the Facebook outage in October 2021, they admitted that they felt a huge sense of relief. One of the respondents made an interesting remark on what could be an effective

safety net in case of deletion of an Instagram account, seeing the most important backup plan in strong interpersonal ties and accumulated social and symbolic capital:

Honestly, I don't do backups, because if you get along well with people, then in any case like, where the account is blocked or deleted, it wouldn't be a problem to get back into their consciousness. There will always be someone willing to help to promote you again, if you were already a proven person and you built something in terms of your achievements, your accomplishments (INT2, 384–388).

Therefore, it seems that this affordance and opportunity choice space is not limited to the functions and features offered by the technological tools of various media, but is also inextricably interwoven with the space of social interactions and traditional social bonds; the importance of networking with other tattoo artists and clients, strongly emphasized by all respondents, will be further discussed in section 3.4.

### 3.3. THE NEW CULTURE OF TATTOOING – LEVEL 3

The analysis of empirical data demonstrates that all interviewees share a common belief in being part of and co-creating a new tattoo culture that highly values the partnership and equality of the tattooed-tattooist relationship, prioritizes cooperation over competition between artists, promotes education and informed consent on the tattooing process, and removes the odium of exclusivity and inaccessibility from the practice of tattooing. They see themselves as the new wave in the tattoo community, replacing the old, closed culture of tattoo parlors, bringing a new quality of tattooing and filling a gap in the education and dissemination of knowledge about the practices of tattooing:

I talk about myself a lot on Instagram. I often add Instastories and share some more intimate thoughts, and I do it to make people feel comfortable with me. For instance, I thought to myself: which tattoo artists do I like and why do I approach someone through Instagram? It's because, for example, someone has said that they have anxiety and sometimes they need to leave a session and then I feel like okay, I can go to this person because they will understand when I need a break, and I've noticed that people have started to resonate a little bit with that: "Oh, I came to you for my first tattoo because I saw, I felt through, these Instastories that you are some kind of an empathetic, nice person." And I try to stand for 'safe space' on my profile so that people can get to know me, because we'll spend some time together when someone comes to me and I'm poking into their skin, so [laughs]... And I also missed that... When I started tattooing, but I didn't work in the industry yet, I often encountered, both on Instagram and directly in the studios, [the tattoo artists] being angry with clients that they're so uninformed, that they ask stupid questions, or that they cancel last minute, and it's so shitty and everything, and I thought to myself – but nobody talks about that. I mean, they tell people off for something that they're not informing them about... People often don't know whether they have to shave before getting a tattoo or not, or how long it takes [getting a tattoo done], or if they can eat [during the session]... I haven't seen on any Polish account that I've been following a consistent Q&A that would answer such tattoo questions, even the stupidest ones. So I decided to create one (INT1, 93–112).

Combining an educational message about the tattooing process with lifestyle content and revealing one's private life (as mentioned and exemplified in section 3.2 above) is a distinctive

feature of the way in which the new generation of tattooists communicates. In this new culture of tattooing, a clear shift in the center of gravity may be observed, that moves from the tattoo as the final result to the tattooing process itself and the relationship that is established in the intimate process of penetrating the skin with a needle. Respondents link this transformation to the rise of social media, Instagram in particular. They all acknowledge that Instagram has opened up opportunities for them to reach people interested in their services and has given them a sense of independence:

Social media has allowed me to reach out directly to people who are potentially interested in what I have to offer them. So if I'm going to be critical of Instagram later on, I have to point out at the beginning that it's something that's allowed me to reach my client group and kind of keep getting in touch with them and reaching out to them and kind of work on my own terms, because people who come to me expect a certain quality of service, which is completely obvious, although I'm not in a situation where someone would force something on me against my style, my aesthetic and my sense of what's right and good. I have my own designs and style to offer, and I have a chance to reach people who are interested in them (INT3, 13–21).

I remember when I first started [4–5 years prior], to put it mildly, I was very much unwanted by older tattoo artists. I mean people 30 plus – I was 19 or 20 when I started. It was definitely a problem [for them] that I dared to do things that were not part of the old-school tattoo scheme, and at that time –it was only 4 years ago –the things that I wanted to do were so weird, but in a negative way –the 'old lions' perceived it in a negative way (INT2, 58–64).

Instagram has significantly expanded the space available to tattoo artists while lowering the barriers to entry into the industry. Two of the respondents work exclusively from their homes; the other three operate from studios they have established, but all of them have the experience of being an apprentice in a traditional tattoo parlor. As they admit, it was Instagram that allowed them to set up their businesses. They find that not only has Instagram enabled the spread of new aesthetic trends in tattooing, it has also lowered the barrier of entry into the industry by eliminating one erstwhile link in the tattoo practice chain, that of tattoo parlors. The 'social media turn' in the tattoo industry is associated with a significant increase in the number of tattoo artists on the market. An interesting observation gleaned from the interviews, in the perception of tattoo artists themselves, is that the growing number of tattoo artists does not imply an increase in competition. The factor of increased demand and interest in tattooing is obviously important here, but this phenomenon is accompanied by an increase in the professional solidarity of tattooists and a sense of a mission to popularize and normalize the practice of tattooing. The interviewees are directly involved in efforts to support young artists taking their first steps in the industry; for instance, every week INT1 gives their space on Instastory to a young artist, showcasing their work and encouraging people to sign up for their tattoos, and they offer courses and online manuals for aspiring tattooists, while another artist goes even further, encouraging clients to try their hand at tattooing:

It seems to me that this is natural process of moving away from the idea that tattooing is something closed, that only a certain group of people can do it. For me it's great and I often tattoo someone and they tell me: 'oh, I have financial problems', and then I say: 'oh, I'll teach you how to tattoo'...

I know that when someone draws and I know that he or she draws well and he or she does some brilliant drawings or even conceptual things, he or she doesn't have to draw great, he or she can do some well-drawn texts and that is a great option, and when people say that 'now there are so many tattoo artists, that everyone is a tattoo artist', but I think in my opinion it is great, because why limit it at all (INT5, 414–422).

Cooperation between representatives of a new generation of tattoo artists as one of the pillars of the business model will be discussed in the next paragraph; at this point, however, a critical remark should be made. While it is right, especially in grounded theory approach, to rely on empirical data and to give voice to the actors themselves in a given social situation, it is also worthwhile, in order to verify and triangulate the collected data, to weigh it against other accounts and sources. As respondents acknowledge, social media has certainly been a change agent in tattoo culture and, as a new channel for connecting tattoo artists and customers, it has established itself as an undeniable alternative to tattoo studios. However, it seems that traditional tattoo parlors also offered a wider variety of styles while remaining committed to traditional tattooing styles and techniques. As Lee Barron (Barron, 2017) argues, an important factor that has led to an increase in the visibility of the tattoo in the social space and the removal of its connotations associated with dangerous subcultures and risky behavior was the appearance of celebrities presenting their tattoos in public as a form of individual expression of the self. This has led to an explosion of interest in tattooing and, in response to increased demand, an expansion of what the tattoo studios offer to include individual designs or less classical aesthetics. Then comes the other change agent – social media. As the contemporary cycles in cultural production become very short and social media – with their infinite capacity and redundancy of stimuli and messages – produce a sense of constant novelty, it becomes difficult for users to consider certain phenomena as having a trajectory and history. Fredric Jameson calls this phenomenon 'cultural amnesia' (Jameson, 1979). The perception of a radical break with the old paradigm of tattooing, which grew out of tattoo studios that exuded an aura of exclusivity while offering a limited range of aesthetics, is shared by all respondents, but it may stem from the specific timing of entering the industry and the lack of direct experience and knowledge of how tattoo parlors operated. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the market of body modification services has undergone significant changes in the last few years and the hegemonic structures of power represented by tattoo studios have lost their influence; the 'new new media' (Levinson, 2013) have become a major player in this social situation, while establishing and reproducing new power structures, this time of a market and economic nature. Further discussion of this transformation in the perspective of the categories developed by postcolonial theory will be made in the final concluding section of the study.

#### 3.4. INSTRUMENTALIZATION AND TARGETING: ULTIMATE GOAL – LEVEL 4

Having discussed the modes of operation of tattoo artists on the Instagram platform, their specific tactics of domesticating and naturalizing this medium and their contributions to building a new tattoo culture, we can now move on to the final section of the analytical part of this article, which will concern the instrumentalization of the activities described

above undertaken by the respondents as part of their professional activity in this medium. All interviewees emphasized that the ultimate and most important goal of running their profiles on Instagram is to acquire customers:

So yeah... the main goal is continuity of bookings. I don't need people to sign up for a long time in advance, so when I have a [calendar booked for the next] month or so, I can loosen up a bit with the content, and then, when things become urgent, suddenly I become very engaged and I upload a lot of flashes. I am very talkative about these tattoos and so on, so it [my activity on Instagram] comes in waves (INT4, 27–31).

Oh, there's also this livestream format, I tried it once because there were all this talk about this engaged community and so on, so I said "oh, ok, I'll try it", I'll try to comply with these golden rules of an engaged community, so I just answered some questions for over an hour that I had asked people to ask me beforehand, and there were a few categories, about tattooing, about books, about my views and so on, and I actually answered these questions for about an hour, and it was so weird for me that it was watched by about 40 people, but it was awesome. 40 people, but the tattoo bookings went crazy after that. And it was weird for me, but I had... I don't know how these algorithms work and so on, but I actually got a lot of requests for tattoos over the next few days (INT4, 242–250).

As seen in the excerpts above, their activity on Instagram fluctuates and is determined by the need to fill a work schedule. Their grassroots tactics of naturalizing the environment of this medium, such as exposing private-life or behind-the-scenes content, organizing various activities for followers and keeping in touch with them, are instrumentalized to ensure a flow of new customers. Contrary to the remarks of Babecki and Żyliński, for respondents naturalization is not a process opposite to instrumentalization, understood as "an effort to create and implement ideas that make it a tool for of communication, which would guarantee the possibility of registering the so-called effects of truthfulness in the reality beyond the media" (Babecki and Żyliński, 2018, p. 13). In this case, naturalization itself is instrumentalized in order to achieve measurable goals of communicative effectiveness and, in effect, to influence material reality. Disclosing private matters, familiarizing the audience, making a feed a safe space is, after all, supposed to result in tattoo bookings. It also implicates that building a position within a medium based solely on internal metrics such as reach and number of followers is not relevant to them.

TikTok is such an illusory medium... you can have a much larger reach in terms of numbers, but in my opinion, let's say, a thousand followers on Instagram versus 10,000 followers on TikTok, this thousand followers on Instagram is of better quality. In terms of the [tattoo] work itself. In the case of my tattoo practice, in pragmatic terms, what's in it for me when I have 10,000 people following me from, say, the Philippines, if I'm probably never going to meet them, nor will they ever come here to Europe? [...] I've noticed such a curious thing, that I've often encountered comments from people who have tried to use TikTok, that it did more... It's not about the harm, it's just that it gave them an endorphin rush, from the amount of people who appreciated their stuff, but what's in that for them when they're wasting their time writing with people who will never come to them to do something [get a tattoo] anyway? [...] I was always considering [Instagram] in terms of how many people come to me in a given month, not how many followers I have at

the end of the month. I've always looked at the purely physical, pragmatic fabric of what I do, not how many people will follow it globally. Because like I said earlier – what is in it for me that I am recognized by the whole world, if potentially from all these countries, only people from my area will be able to visit me? [...] I've never been impressed by the sheer numbers and I've never depended on that in my entire approach to what I do. Of course, if there is some growth, it always makes you happy, but on the other hand it also brings this problem that now I will have to answer to more people [requests] and most of them will probably not want to do anything with me at the end of the day. They just like to chat (INT2, 355–371, 395–400, 426–431).

The pleasure of external gratification in the form of likes or comments is acknowledged by the respondents, but at the end of the day they are aware that what is important is the translation of these virtual interactions into real effects they have on their business:

It [the number of followers] just stresses me out... and then I find myself thinking that it's so irrelevant. For me the most important thing is to have clients for next month. And that's my only goal, to be able to make a living off that, because what's in it for me when I have 20,000 followers but I don't have a job for another two weeks? For what? And I feel like my brain is sometimes, you know, it craves new followers, it feels like this dopamine starts to work, and it's making me so anxious. It's addictive... (INT1, 403–410).

Although the need to ensure continuity of bookings leads them to organize all of their activity within the service, that does not mean that tattoo artists want to acquire customers at any cost, by any means possible. The interviewees apply the tactic of rational investment of their resources (time, attention, engagement) in Instagram activity in order to achieve maximum results:

I tried to run a Facebook profile, but the feedback from Facebook was really low, so I got discouraged with this medium. I don't know if I did the right thing or if I did it out of laziness, but I saw that it was more profitable for me to invest [my resources] in Instagram (INT3, 349–351).

As long as I have that month of bookings ahead, I don't go into any extra stuff, my goal is satisfied. So I could spend a lot of time and have a lot of views on TikTok, but I doubt it will translate into more bookings, so I don't do it. There are various tattoo portals, but to be there for the sake of being there is just pointless. And when it comes to [tattoo] conventions, I've probably been to one or two... but I also don't think that it translates into anything when it comes to the bookings... I can catch a client without leaving my house, so it's better for everyone not to leave the house than to just spend a lot of money and get terribly tired at these conventions (INT4, 364–373).

And I also know that Instagram rewards super-infantile things like quizzes, I mean, I'm not fucking doing the "guess my favorite color" quiz for grown-up people. That'd be crazy, right? Or, like, Instagram also really wants people to interact with me, so once in a while, when my account is dying, well, then I do these AMA [ask me anything] sessions, even though I don't really care about that. You have to post it from time to time so that the account goes, you know [gestures with hand rising], skyrocketing (INT4, 171–177).

From the examples above the following picture emerges: their approach to using Instagram tips, tricks and hacks to increase account visibility is akin to a relationship with a deity

to whom sacrifices must be made from time to time. However, being too proactive is also undesirable, and in fact can be potentially dangerous. Too much coverage and interest in their work can become a curse for the tattoo artist:

I feel like a lot of people think that the reach is followed by the job. It definitely is, but the problem is that you can fail to live up to expectations because tattooing is a responsible job. It shouldn't be done halfway. I discovered this in myself that when there were better months, where I had a surplus of work, but I wasn't even aware that something could be a surplus for me, it never ended well for me. It's not even about the service per se that I was providing, it's about my attitude that I wasn't happy with, because I felt that I wasn't doing it to the extent that I should be doing it – what I expected of myself (INT2, 447–452).

Refraining from excessive activity or, in contrast, publishing content that has a specific tone or touches on particular topics, with the hope that it will be displayed to potentially interested users thanks to the operation of the algorithm, may also be considered as a vernacular, grassroots audience-targeting tool for tattoo artists. An even more important function of this tactic is that of calibrating the audience base, sifting out people whose values, aesthetic taste, or views might be incompatible with their own:

It [revealing one's views and personality] is also important in a matter of eliminating some people this way, which is awesome, because I wouldn't want to spend too much time with someone I'm arguing with and neither would that person... Especially since there's such a plethora of tattoo artists that if someone has a problem with values that are important to me, I'd rather they not come to me and that's it. It's very much selection on that basis (INT4, 69–74).

I'm a pretty sensitive person... I've been tattooing for four years now, and I've found that I give a lot of myself. When a person comes to me, it's hard for me to separate that kind of work from... okay, like, someone comes as a client, and that's it. And I do the tattoo, and that's it. I soak up both the emotions and the approach of these people who come to me. I've noticed that I've made such a nice niche for myself – using the style of tattooing, my thoughts, approach to life, the memes I share, and so on. In fact, I would rather have fewer clients, but only from that bubble of mine, than... Like, I don't use that kind of [paid] promotion on Instagram, or I'm just afraid to promote in places other than Instagram because I don't want people who don't know me, who don't follow my feed, to hit on me (INT1, 191–197).

This tactic serves both sides of the tattooing process: building a tattooist's online persona by publishing content of a specific nature also helps followers to better research services and choose a person whose style of tattooing is appealing to them, but more importantly, whose style of social interaction will be comfortable for them, since, as discussed in the previous section, a holistic view of the tattooing process as a relationship is characteristic for the contemporary participants in tattoo culture:

And in terms of [publishing] private stuff, yes, clearly it does have an effect on bookings and on interest. There is something that, well, when you go for a tattoo, it's such an intimate thing, an intimate visit and... Well, now people have a huge choice of tattoo styles, there are thousands of tattoo artists in every city, so people can freely choose from these service providers, so when it

comes to me showing my face or some moments from everyday life, it's not that I'm fighting for clients, it's just that I'm giving some kind of a signal that, well, you're going to some kind of, you know, normie, that you shouldn't expect that I'll drive up on a Harley and that I'll tattoo you in some basement or something... Well, [I want to show] that they're going to an ordinary person, and so that they won't be stressed because there isn't any controversy about me, you can always talk to me about doggos or something (INT4, 56–68).

[On average] once a week a person comes in and says they came in for their first tattoo because they couldn't imagine going to another person because they felt so comfortable on my Instagram. And it's super motivating to me that I'm doing cool stuff and that person then comes back, it's also the most important thing to me that that person really felt so comfortable that they came back to me for another tattoo (INT1, 325–329).

As mentioned above, respondents hardly ever use professional Instagram advertising tools as they seem too obscure and advanced, so they are thus not worth investing in. Meanwhile, their own alternative ways of reaching their desired customer base appear to be far more effective. These tactics can also include networking between members of the new generation of tattoo artists. This takes the form of, for example, tagging each other in their Instastories or posts, but also going beyond the digital world by inviting each other to guest spots. The customers themselves also act as ambassadors for the artists, for example by tagging them in photos of their healed tattoos. Moreover, the tattoos themselves, functioning in the social space of the visual, act as memes in Dawkins' original conception – as units of cultural information that spread through society like a virus (Dawkins, 1989):

The best networking tool is going to guest spots, and it really translates [into bookings]. I go to, let's say, Wroclaw. And like here in Warsaw the word-of-mouth works, someone sees my tattoo and asks "who did it?" and someone will redirect him or her to me, then in Warsaw we have, so to say, spread this virus, but it is good to go to other cities and sow the seeds there, so that few people with my tattoos would walk around these cities, so that these people, not only on Instagram, could see it live, verify how it looks like in person, and then one may feel more motivated to come to Warsaw from Wroclaw, Cracow, or Poznan. So it works, too (INT4, 373–382).

Going back to the digital environment, apparently, as some respondents reported, the operations of algorithms, while not always understandable from the users' perspective, sometimes yields unexpected, positive results, opening up new opportunities:

There was this girl from a studio in Poznan... she uploaded it [an Instastory] (she also does awesome tattoos), and I literally gave her just a reaction to the story and then she followed me, invited me to the convention, and the studio started following me. All it took was one reaction [to the story], my clueless reaction, and that one reaction triggered it and a bunch of other things happened (INT5, 127–134).

The experience of complexity, of being lost in the implicit logic of social media algorithms, policies and procedures, as several times brought up by some respondents, is therefore counterbalanced by the experience of encounters with the unexpected by allowing emergent processes to work. The question of Instagram as a complex system, whose normative characteristics

are uncertainty and unpredictability, connectedness and networkedness, emergence, openness and variability, is addressed in the last part of the text.

#### 4. SUMMARY AND FINAL CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this study argues that the growth of social media has had a huge impact on the body modification services market. This shift of power and trajectory of transformation brings to mind the dynamics of the decolonization process.<sup>4</sup> The model of social dynamics of the time of empire (Hardt and Negri, 2006), in which power (in this case, of technological nature) is dis-centered, networked, and difficult to grasp and oppose, seems interesting and fruitful to apply on the development of tattoo culture in the digital environment, and it deserves separate research. From the perspective of tattoo artists, the emergence of social media as a major player has opened up new opportunities to run their own businesses, independent of tattoo studios, which previously provided the infrastructure of work and the space for the production of tattoo culture. Apparently, in the new social situation where traditional tattoo parlors have become irrelevant, social media has taken their place as the new structures of power, this time of economic and technological nature. A young generation of home-based, self-proclaimed tattoo artists has struck out on its own, gaining a new space for action, namely Instagram, in which they must operate in accordance with the procedures, rules and policies required by the technological intermediary. This limits vertical movements aimed at systemic change – which is why actors in the social situation, in this case tattoo artists, are looking for their own vernacular, grassroots ways to tame the medium and adapt it to their needs as best they can. This means that in the new infrastructure that produces a new cultural situation, there are also new movements of a horizontal nature; the tools of poaching in the foreign land of the medium used by tattoo artists range from trying to discover and hack the logic of algorithms and harness them for their own purposes, through producing their own visual and communication codes that allow them to effectively attract customers, to instrumentalizing practices of naturalization of the medium, such as their content saturated with personal traits. They treat social media not as once-consolidated structures, but rather as spaces of affordances (Gibson, 1979) from which they choose the appropriate ways to use them, making the experience of functioning in them as personal, tamed and imbued with a personal character as possible. Although Instagram is their main channel of communication, tattoo artists do not rely solely on it. Functioning in a polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2012), they diversify risk and support themselves in their work with other technological tools and secure their work by building personal ties within the industry and investing in social and symbolic

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<sup>4</sup> However far-reaching the comparison of the transformation of tattoo culture to decolonization processes may seem, I use it with appreciation for the achievements of postcolonial studies and with the awareness that the model of the dynamics of social change drawn from postcolonial theory has already been applied to other phenomena of social life; for example, Randy Martin (Martin, 2015) uses decolonization process as a tool for reflecting on the contemporary logic of derivatives and other financial products that have broken free from the power of banks and financial institutions.

capital. These social networks of a new type, when analyzed through the example of the tattoo community, appear to be more extensive and yet of a looser weave – it is possible to function on their periphery, on one's own terms, while remaining in the orbit of social support offered by it. The practices and tactics of tattoo artists described above indicate that they are comfortable with the dynamic complex systems in which they operate (Batorski et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2009), trying to deal in their own ways with the experience of emergence as a fundamental force shaping social processes (Krajewski, 2013), partly accepting it, partly trying to negotiate their agency, while remaining open to chance events, which may sometimes lead to unexpected, positive occurrences. Their flexibility and willingness to adapt is perhaps the reason why tattoo artists don't fear power shifts on the technological market or even the demise of Instagram as such; they are aware of the historicity of this medium and anticipate that the future of social media is happening now and want to remain open to it.

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