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Tattooed female bodies: Considerations from the literature

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Introduction

In this article, we present an overview of literature that explores tattooed female bodies. Focusing particularly on literature on femininities and embodiment, we consider how tattooed women's bodies are read culturally, and the implications of this reading for our further understanding of the social construction of femininities. We explore how hegemonic notions of femininities and embodiment intersect in our cultural reading of women's tattooed bodies. To conclude, we look at how femininities and embodiment are important in understanding how femininity is constituted, how women experience their tattooed bodies differently, and what this means in terms of how the body is read culturally.

For a number of reasons, it seems to be a good time to discuss and reflect upon research on tattooed women's bodies. The popularity of tattoos has increased over the last decade – there has been a 173% increase in the numbers of tattoo studios on British high streets between 2003 and 2013 (Economist, 2014). There has been a significant increase in media articles of tattooing (Rohrer, 2007) and newspaper articles often reflect a certain moral panic about the rise of tattoos among so called 'normal' people (for example, older white men, middle aged and married women). Articles in popular media are particularly preoccupied with gender and tattooed bodies (Meads & Nurse, 2013). In particular there is a repetitive trope about the apparent incomprehensibility of tattooed feminine bodies, with repeated articles questioning why women get tattooed (Ashworth, 2013). This cultural performance of

incomprehensibility may be linked to the construction of tattooing as a 'deviant' social practice (Kosut, 2000), but it is clearly linked to idealised notions of Western white, middle class femininity, a construct that would largely exclude such body modifications (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). For example, representations of tattoos in popular media including drawing links between tattoos and aggression (Swami et al., 2015) and between promiscuity and unattractiveness in women (Swami & Furnham, 2007) – all clearly at odds with 'nice' middle class femininity. The research from Swami et al (2007, 2015) provides popular media with findings that add to the negative constructions that are constituted about tattooed female bodies.

One of our interests in this article is to explore tattoos through an intersectional feminist lens (Nash, 2008). Whilst seminal intersectional work focuses on gender and race (Crenshaw, 1991), here, an intersectional framework is utilised to address the intersections of class and gender (Skeggs, 1997). How can we make sense of these problematic representations of tattooed female bodies, by looking at the intersections of, for example, gender, class, and age? Looking age-appropriate and the notion of growing old 'gracefully' are middle class constructions (Jankowski et al, 2014) that regulate women's embodied social practices of ageing. The concept of intersectionality has become increasingly important in feminist writing and activism (Crenshaw, 1991), highlighting that feminist thought must disrupt a white, middle class view of femininity (Butler, 2013). To understand women's experiences of tattoos we must explore how social class intersects with gender and age and sexuality. Women do not experience tattoos in the same way – the different layers of interconnected issues enable different experiences of the body. For example, in the application of a model of intersectionality (Anthias, 2005), tattooed women can occupy 'contradictory' locations - ageing and working class being more subordinate, and being younger and of middle class background being more dominant. By exploring the

tattooed feminine body intersectionally, we are better able to understand how the body is informed by experience, and read by others.

Choices, production and constructions of femininity

An important question for a feminist study of tattooing is whether this embodied practice might have subversive or liberatory potential for women. Can tattooing challenge dominant constructions of femininity? This is a complex question, which requires an analysis of the construction of feminine embodiment, its commodification, and the liberatory potential of tattoos as both subversive marker and consumer product.

Women's embodied practices are often described in relation to a discourse of choice – that women can 'choose' to conform to, or resist dominant ideals of femininity (Walter, 2010), and that all choices are equally valid. Choice itself is feted as liberatory – women are 'free' because they are 'free to choose'. However, this notion of choice – to shave your legs or not, to wear make-up or not, to be thin or fat, etc – is in many senses mythic (McRobbie, 2009) as it remains constituted within other regulative discursive practices. We are not 'free to choose', rather we are *compelled* to choose. Not choosing is not an option. This re-reading of women's liberation positions us as always embedded in consumer practices and commodification. We are positioned as women to consume. This 'freedom' to choose is constituted within neoliberal economic conditions, in which that choice is not unfettered – rather as Western subjects, the choice to consume itself is compulsory (McRobbie, 2009). Further, whilst the range of possible embodied practices for women may have widened and shifted for women, the choices that women make are still constrained by what is acceptable, or unacceptable within culturally constituted boundaries.

A key element in the production of femininities is positioning of women's bodies as objects of the male gaze (Grosz, 1994) – 'bodies are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural and class particularities' (p. 19).

The way that women adorn their bodies with tattoos enables conformity or resistance to these bounded concepts of femininity. Through objectification of the body, women learn how they are represented and constructed (Aubrey, 2006), and observe self surveillance (Foucault, 1976) to monitor where they might fit in and how identities are formed through consideration of gaze and imposition upon the body. In a world full of rules and norms, tattoos are obtained as a way of resisting regulation, and as a way of protesting against the consumerist culture of today (Langman, 2008). However, they are still bought – they remain in themselves a consumer product, a commodity. Women’s bodies remain positioned in relation to what is deemed as acceptable appearance and behaviour. On the one hand, dominant notions of femininity cannot be projected onto women’s bodies that have been adorned with tattoos (Thomas, 2012). In this sense, tattooing is a way to retrieve the female body from the oppressive gaze, enabling them to produce their own reflexive and embodied constructions of femininity, and utilize the body to perform their femininities. Tattoos can be used as a way of embodying multiple femininities, and re/co/constructing the feminine body in a way that is personal to that individual, by giving them the agency to do so. However, tattooing as a practice remains a consumer product, within a marketplace that still values beauty and must consequently reproduce (in altered form) the very gaze that it resists. In this sense, whilst choosing tattoos may seem a liberatory practice for women, they are nonetheless still a consumer product – they may be art, but they are art that we must buy. Tattoos cannot remove women from practices of commodification, but tattooing may function to subvert those practices.

Over the life course, a lot of focus is placed upon the female body (Chrisler, Fung, Lopez, & Gorman, 2013; Owen & Spencer, 2013; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013), which has been linked to women’s experiences of body satisfaction, and distress (Stitz & Pierce, 2013; Vartanian & Dey, 2013). Women of all ages fall under scrutiny for needing

to achieve the youthful look. However, as women age, they become less visible within society (Segal & Showalter, 2014). Though there is a suggested link between greater body satisfaction and older women, suggested as due to being less apparent in advertising and the media (Angelini, Cavapozzi, Corazzini, & Paccagnella, 2012), this does not remove them from the pressures experienced as a consequence of being a woman. Age is an important factor in the consideration for women with tattoos, as the tattooed body is criticized across the lifespan. To be young and tattooed is considered reckless (Swami, 2012), as though younger women are unable to consider the impact of their tattoos on their lives in the future. For younger people, tattoos can signify a rite of passage into adulthood, as well as establishing a sense of self (Kang & Jones, 2007). For older women, they can serve as a way of reclaiming agency over the body and celebration, but also evoke negative reaction because of the way that older women's bodies are culturally read (Kang & Jones 2007). Growing older for Western women, and particularly middle class women, means looking 'good for your age', or 'growing old gracefully' (Baraitser, 2014) but this is a fraught social process beset with potential pitfalls. For instance, the older woman should 'look good for her age' (i.e. look younger than she is), but should never fall into the trap of being 'mutton dressed as lamb' (Krekula, 2016; Lovgren, 2013).

Within Western culture, the dominant construction of 'ideal femininity' is class based, and generally quite resistant to change. The feminine ideal is 'pretty' in presentation, and the 'right' shape – a 'Disney Princess ideal' (McGladrey, 2014; Yan & Bissell, 2014) – pale, slim, young, even featured, able bodied, long haired, curvy but not ostentatiously so. The notion of femininity that is (re)produced within society is based on a middle class ideal – a representation that centres on white privilege (Okolosie, 2014) and lacks in diversity. Though defining class boundaries might not be as clear cut as in the past, it remains that 'respectability has always been a marker and a burden of class, a standard to which to

aspire' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 3). The art of tattooing subverts this traditional, middle class notion of what it is to be feminine. Firstly, beauty is viewed as pure and natural – by permanently inking the skin, the body is no longer pure. As Skeggs (1997) notes, 'the surface of their bodies is the site upon which distinctions are drawn' (page 84). This suggests that the subversive mark of the tattoo also functions as a permanent marker of difference from middle class feminine norms, marking the body as differently classed, as otherly feminine. This is important for how women construct their femininities, by having to keep in mind how they might be read by others. It is clear that tattooing as a social practice is rife with class based risks. For instance, whilst some tattoos might be described as 'small, tasteful, hidden' (and therefore acceptable within discourses of middle class femininity), others are seen as ostentatious, problematic, loud, decried for instance as 'tacky', 'mistakes', 'tramp stamps'. As the working class are already constituted as 'the other' (DeMello, 2000), to be tattooed within this class context permanently marks the body of the individual, in the view that it is those of the lower classes who would choose to mark the body in that way. Evidence of this can be seen in the objections rehearsed in news articles to the way that tattoos impede upward mobility (Conway, 2013), whereby tattooed employees consider 'what to wear for a job interview', or how 'you can't get a job looking like that'. By considering class, we are looking to demonstrate the ways that experiences will differ (Nash, 2008); through being a woman, through being of a certain class, and also, through being tattooed. Each of these – in addition to many others – adds a new layer to the experience of femininities. The main issue with Western femininity is that it is based on privilege, rendering other forms of femininity that are outside of this position as invisible, but at the same time, it is subdued to masculinity, thus is a complex positionality. Tattoos become visible and stand in juxtaposition with femininity because, as their popularity increases, women can choose whether to resist or conform to ideal constructions of femininity.

The classed reading of women's tattoos is clearly illustrated in the cases of pop stars such as Tulisa Contostavlos and Cheryl Cole. Both women were celebrated as public sweethearts, embodying feminine beauty, during their involvement on the X Factor television show. They were 'working class women made good', in many senses beating middle class women at the feminine game. However, their subsequent large visible tattoos made them subject to intense scrutiny and criticism (Gould, 2011). This is particularly interesting in the case of Cheryl Cole, whose history of racially aggravated assault appears to have been forgiven by the media (Carter, 2003), but whose rose tattooed derriere appears to have been a step too far for our celebrity struck culture. Her tattoo was voted the worst celebrity tattoo ever (Foster, 2015). The tattoo itself contains no errors, misspelled words, or embarrassing content as others in the list do – it would seem that the reason she obtained this title is due to its overall size and location on her body, factors which appear to combine to make it 'tacky'. The central focus for Tulisa centres on her pride for her working class background: the media describe her as 'queen of the chavs' and she is known for her 'tacky tattoos' (Boshoff, 2013; Moore, 2014). Being visibly and proudly working class is a fraught process for celebrities: on one hand, it encourages identification by the public; however, any missteps in their performance of feminine beauty are open to public class based scrutiny. For both women, their tattoos are portrayed as a step too far, too tacky, too 'working class'. In having tattoos, they effectively evidence their 'spoiled feminine identities' (Goffman, 1959), as they fail to 'live up' to beauty ideals, betraying their working class origin through their supposed 'lack of taste'. In this sense, their public humiliation as 'queen of chavs' and 'worst celebrity tattoo' functions to discipline women for potential violations of their feminine ideal. They become cautionary tales for both working class and middle class women.

Overall, it is clear through the exploration of this research that dominant constructions of femininity are positioned in contradictory ways, and that there are clearly 'right' (privileged) ways to 'do' femininity (Bartky, 1990). Performances of femininity remain highly constrained and monitored, and the regulative practices of femininity are also highly classed. Working class women are subject to disciplinary practices if they seem too 'uppity' or pretentious; middle class women are disciplined for lapses of taste, or for 'lowering themselves' (Skeggs, 1997). We have already mentioned the different values placed on small, delicate and tasteful tattoos and 'tramp stamps', and how these function as class markers (Madfis & Arford, 2013). In addition, tattooed middle class women often engage in justification narratives when talking about their tattoos - for instance, describing them in terms of their personal meaning and symbolism, thus reducing the stigma they face for their 'choices' (Adams, 2009; DeMello, 2000). Though it is situated as such, we must acknowledge emerging alternative femininities, through recognition for how diverse femininities can be, dependent on a vast web of factors within each individual's experiences. The relevance of why it is important to gain an understanding of the experiences of women with tattoos must be acknowledged.

Embodiment, conformity and resistance

Tattoos and body modifications are as much a part of fashion trends as are clothing and hairstyles. During the 1980s, tribal tattoos were recognised as being in trend and sought after exotic pieces of art (DeMello, 2000), whereas the trends of today are very different in terms of design (Bayley, 2014). As constructions and representations of what is means to be feminine changes, so does the acceptability of tattoos on women (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), and the design of the tattoos that they 'may' or 'may not' have. In this sense, tattoos are just as subject to the regulative gaze of fashion and commodification as any other style trend. They are objects of desire, to be purchased, worn and displayed.

Like any other fashion trend, tattoos are characterised by the paradoxical tension of conformity and self-expression. Whilst research on fashion trends suggests that fashion conformity is associated with social acceptance (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Park & Yang, 2010), there is little parallel research on trends in tattooing. Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson (2005) explored meanings of the fashion tattoo, finding that tattoos are 'comparable to other consumption practices where people seek to beautify their bodies according to current fashion norms' (p. 172). Alongside this, the increase in effective laser surgery has reduced the stigma of getting inked (Sweetman, 1999), meaning people can more readily remove ink that they regret. An example of trends and subsequent regret comes from the so called 'tramp stamp' – a tattoo on the lower back of a woman's body – once popular, and now seen as an emblem of promiscuity (Guéguen, 2012). Rather than this being considered a fashion, the placement of this tattoo on the body has dictated a wider negative perception of the body it is inked upon (Langman, 2008; Nowosielski, Sipiński, Kuczerawy, Kozłowska-Rup, & Skrzypulec-Plinta, 2012; Swami & Furnham, 2007). The lack of research that focuses on tattoo placement as an important consideration leaves negative associations to be constituted for the body and the ways that it is perceived, once fashion trends have passed.

However, the tattooed body is always classed, raced and gendered. It is not (just) a feminine tattooed body; tattoos on women of colour, are not read in the same way as, for example, delicate and discreet etchings on a white (middle class, able, straight) female body. Whilst white, middle class women can more easily express their (good) femininity through the art that they wear (Doss & Hubbard, 2009), in contrast, tattoos on black (Betz-Bornstein, 2013), lesbian, gender-nonconforming (Pitts, 2000), disabled (Zitzelsberger, 2005), working class bodies can, in some senses, contribute to their further positioning as *other*.

Tattooed bodies are able to traverse both conformity and resistance to trends simultaneously (Atkinson, 2002). Though perceptions towards tattoos have shifted over the past decade, tattoos on women specifically can be described as creating cultural 'noise' (Hebdige, 1979) as they fall outside of expected traditional femininity. This 'noise' disrupts the norms that are expected of the female body, allowing change and 'alternative' bodies to be heard. Through the agentic tattooed body, oppressive societal norms are resisted, whilst also enabling cultural belonging. This resistance against traditional femininity enables women to gain control over their bodies (Roberts, 2012), whilst at the same time, enables the younger generation of women to enter into the fashionable trend of feminine themed tattoos (Young, 2001). Self identity can develop through tattoos, influenced by cultural trends of the particular time. One of the most cited reasons for tattoo removal is the lack of relation to identity (Armstrong et al, 1996; Armstrong et al., 2008; Burriss & Kim, 2007). Tattoos are a permanent fixture on the body, but whilst they may represent who that woman is at that particular time, this does not mean that the body is not open to change and reinscription. At various points, women may want to feel more aligned towards one group, and their identities can develop. This contests the association that tattoos appear on the already anti-social, deviant body (Cardasis, Huth-Bocks, & Silk, 2008; Nowosielski et al, 2012; Way, 2013), and demonstrates the value that tattoos hold to the wearer at any given time. Women who reject dominant notions of femininity by getting tattoos, further reinforce what is considered as alternative femininity, as well as ideal femininity. Their position reinforces and reproduces the established traditional notions of femininity (Atkinson, 2002; Day, 2010).

An example of this from online media comes from the 'Suicide Girl' – referring to the removal of the self from 'mainstream society', and linking to the term 'social suicide' (SuicideGirls, 2014, 2016). Women model their 'alternative' body, which the website cites as its key feature. In this

context, 'alternative' is non-white, disabled, vividly coloured hair, and extensive body modifications, amongst other forms. Within the context of what would be considered alternative femininities, negotiation occurs between resisting dominant notions of femininity (Holland, 2004) whilst at the same time being entangled within culturally defined issues of self, such as ethnicity. Whilst some applaud the site for showcasing differing representations of femininity (Magnet, 2007), diversifying from the oppressive, cosmetically enhanced women who dominate the pornography industry, SuicideGirls builds upon the 'beautifully imperfect' (Magnet, 2007). Via this social media platform, women are able to submit images of themselves, displaying their quirkiness, their unusual sexiness. Whilst on one hand, the site exudes empowerment of women, on the other, nonetheless women's bodies are still positioned in relation to the male gaze (Gill, 2008; Grosz, 1994), focusing on their sexual attractiveness, in a newer niche in the consumerist corner of pornography. They are additional, more exotic items on the menu, but the menu is still on the table. Whilst it may be enabling these women to celebrate their uniqueness, this is not the main purpose of the website – it is a consumer based, pay per view service, and the value of woman-as-product remains measured by her consumer price, the number of clicks she can generate. Our point here is not around the right of women to sell their own images, but that the value placed on these images is still related to their attractiveness, undermining the potential subversiveness of the site.

Media plays an interesting constitutive role in the production of normative constructions of femininity – both producing and reproducing dominant notions of what it means to be a woman. It is therefore interesting to consider how tattooed women are represented in this arena. Though they may not be represented in the mainstream media as an example of what we consider as beautiful, avenues have opened up in terms of a niche for alternative femininities to blossom, despite the tension between it being liberating, and also a new consumerist product. Within these depictions of

alternative femininities, they still play into mainstream ideals of how to pose and how to act in order to play up to sexual gaze, therefore reinforcing discourses of sexual attraction in mainstream and alternative women. With fashion and consumer culture in tattooed women, we can see how the embodiment of gender is embedded within societal trends. Tattoos have been increasing in popularity for some time, and even within this time, trends in tattoo design and placement have come and gone. At the same time, tattoos are more than just a fashion accessory, embodying strength, and resisting hegemonic oppressions. However, the freedom to conform or subvert these oppressions is not free of class.

Conclusion

Tattooed female bodies exist on a broad spectrum, and are positioned and read in multiple ways. Tattooed female bodies are purported to offer women with the agency to choose how they portray themselves, and whether they want to conform to or resist dominant notions of femininity. What must be understood here is the boundaries within which these choices are constrained – freedom to choose is not 'free', and in particular, it is not free of class or gender. Popular media clearly has an overarching influence in how tattoos on women are perceived, and also how they're spoken of. In exploring women's lived experiences of tattoos, it is important not to reproduce essentialist notions of authentic femininity, but to consider the multiplicity of women's experiences, and the intersections of femininities with disabilities, race, gender, age and class.

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