TATTOO SUBCULTURE

A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF TATTOO SUBCULTURE AMONG STUDENTS AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY

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"Wearing a tattoo connected the person to significant others who were similarly marked, (making) one unique by separating him or her from those who were too convention-bound to so alter their bodies."

Sanders, 1989, cited in Gelder, 2007, p. 132

Summary

Purpose - As tattoos have increased in popularity and have been commodified in mainstream society, it is interesting how contemporary tattoo consumers from a community not previously associated with tattoos, perceive and experience this subculture.

Problem Statement - How do tattooed students at Aalborg University perceive the contemporary tattoo subculture and to what extent do they identify with this subculture?

Methodology - The research in this thesis is conducted within the interpretivist paradigm, investigating the perception and experiences with tattoo subculture among tattooed students at Aalborg University. Seven tattooed students were chosen based on the diversity of their study programs; five danish students and two international students. The questions for the qualitative interviews were based on the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework - The theoretical framework of this thesis is following a conical process; first describing theory on subcultures in general followed by theory specifically related to tattoo subculture. The general theory of subcultures are primarily focused on six characteristics of subcultures by Gelder (2007), while the theory on tattoo subculture consists of a number of different themes, that are distinct for the subculture of tattooing and found in various academic sources.

Analysis - The results of the qualitative interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The themes to focus on where found in the answers related to the theoretical framework, but also by analyzing themes brought up by the participants, that were not related to the theoretical framework.

Conclusion - The analysis of the qualitative interviews displayed similarities in the perceptions of tattoo subculture. It was acknowledged that tattoos have been commodified, which have lead to the subculture being under pressure with a series of consequences for the subculture and its members. The students did identify with not identify with the tattoo subculture on a series of central themes, which leads to the conclusion that the tattooed students at Aalborg University generally do not identify fully with the contemporary tattoo subculture, but rather to a small extent.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

I have always been a fan of tattoos, because I see them as the ultimate method of adorning the body, and because of their symbolism as an extension of identity. I feel that society today is much more accepting towards tattoos, but they have struggled to become accepted and finding their place in contemporary society. My interest in tattoos have resulted in me having 5 tattoos on my body, so I have experienced the rituals of becoming tattooed. However, I have had difficulties with assessing my own membership and affiliation to the tattoo subculture, which made me curious about how other tattooed young people perceive this membership. My own difficulties are to be found in my prioritizing of a future career over my interest in tattoos. This has made me curious as to how people in my own situation are perceiving the tattoo subculture and to what extent they feel like a part of the subculture following their beliefs and experiences with being tattooed.

Tattoos are not a great part of a cultural heritage in western countries, as it is the case in for example Polynesia or New Zealand, where tattoos have been an important part of the culture for centuries or even millenniums (DeMello, 2000; Awekotuku, 2002). Tattooing had been practiced in various forms in western cultures throughout history, but it was captain James Cook, who introduced tattooing to western civilization after a journey to the pacific (DeMello, 2000). Tattoos can be seen as a global phenomena as it is found in different cultures all over the world to a greater or lesser extent (Sanders & Vail, 2008), but the history of tattoos in western societies are especially interesting as tattoos have been subject to stigmatizing by mainstream society in modern times until a few decades ago, where it has experienced a renaissance (DeMello, 2000; Sanders & Vail, 2008). Around the beginning of the 20th century, tattoos were mostly associated with criminals, sailors and other persons with questionable characters, but in recent years, a renaissance for tattoos has emerged and they have been both commodified and experienced an increase in popularity (DeMello, 2014) - almost to the point of being labelled as mainstream (Kosut, 2006). In western societies, tattoos have traditionally mostly been a style of subcultures - as part of other subcultures, but also as an independant subculture (DeMello, 2000; Sanders & Vail, 2008), and it is interesting to see how more and more people are getting tattoos - even groups that would not previously have been associated with the traditional subculture using tattoos as subcultural style.

This study is aimed at creating deeper knowledge on tattoo subculture and how it is perceived among contemporary tattooees following its increase in popularity and possible commodification from subcultural style to mainstream consumer good. This thesis is thought to reveal new aspects of a subculture in order to better understand the way that subcultures are a part of the contemporary western society. As my initial reason for researching this areas is based in my reflection of my own identification, or affiliation, with the tattoo subculture, this thesis researches tattooed students at a higher education, as myself.

1.1 Problem Statement

The general topic in focus in this thesis is the contemporary tattoo subculture in western societies, and more specifically how it is perceived by a group of people, who have not previously been associated with tattoos and tattoo subculture; students at higher educations. To conceptualize this topic in order to research it, the following problem statement have been designed:

How do tattooed students at Aalborg University perceive the contemporary tattoo subculture and to what extent do they identify with the tattoo subculture?

In order to answer the problem formulation, I will be reviewing previous research, as well as statements by members of the tattoo subculture, to determine themes central to the western tattoo subculture. These themes are then to be researched in a contemporary setting by interviewing tattooed students at Aalborg University on their feelings, beliefs and experiences on the contemporary western tattoo subculture, in order to research their perception of tattoo subculture and how they position themselves in relation to this subculture.

To research the perception of tattoo subculture by contemporary tattooees, this thesis has chosen to focus on tattooed students at Aalborg University. The tattooed students were chosen because they have chosen to have tattoos, but they have not chosen to pursue a job within the tattoo industry, but rather an academic course. By not choosing tattooed people directly related to the subculture of tattooing - as tattoo artists are - this thesis is able to research, how contemporary tattooees perceive contemporary tattoo subculture and what extent they identify with this subculture. As described in the previous section, students at higher educations have not previously been associated with

tattoos and tattoo subculture, but the general commodification and increase in popularity of tattoos have resulted in university students becoming tattooed too.

Aalborg University has been chosen because of the extensive network of the researcher in this institution, the general connection to the researcher, as well as it is the belief of the researcher, that Aalborg University is a generic example on higher educational institutions, making the results applicable for students at other higher educational institutions. In order to research the topic in a global perspective, it is the intention of the researcher that the participant of this research presents both danish and international students of Aalborg University. This is done because it is the belief of the researcher, that tattoo subculture to some extent is present in all parts of the western world; it is a global phenomena that does not rely on physical boundaries.

1.2. Terminology

Certain words in this thesis can have different meanings depending on the interpretation of the reader, as well as this thesis uses terminology from the world of tattooing. This section is included to provide the reader with an explanation of the interpretation by the researcher of specific words used in this thesis.

Body Modification   Any method to (semi-)permanently altering the body, including piercings and tattoos. (Wohlrab et al., 2006)

Sleeve   A fully tattooed arm; like the sleeve of a shirt.

Tattoo   The permanent product created when applying pigmentation to the dermis of the skin, either by pricking with pointy objects or by rubbing into small cuts done by a sharp object (Serup et al., 2015).

Tattooee   A person with a tattoo. The term is used in several researches related to tattoos and tattooing, such as Sanders (1985), Goulding et al. (2004) and Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson (2005)

Tattoo Parlor   A professional tattoo shop.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

2.1 Philosophy of Science

Choosing the methodologies most appropriate for answering a problem statement is a key component in conducting a research. The combination of methodological considerations provided in this section gives an insight in the choices made in order to successfully research the problem statement chosen for this thesis. It show my position as a researcher in relation to the philosophy of science and how this position affects the research design and the methods used in the research process. The methodological framework of this thesis is based on the views of Guba (1990) and Bryman (2012), on the use of paradigms in research and its fundamental character in conducting a research. According to Guba (1990), a paradigm is a system of beliefs that is built upon three elements, that are important to the research; ontology, epistemology and methodology - and these elements have an influence on what should be studied, how to conduct the research and how to interpret the results of the research (Bryman, 2012).

2.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is defined as the nature, or perception, of reality by the researcher and whether or not the reality should be considered to be external from social actors, or social constructions made up by social actors, based on their perceptions and actions (Bryman, 2012; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The importance of stating the system of belief used in this theis can be seen in the topic for this study, where it is relevant to clarify to what extent, the image of membership to a consumer tribe based on tattoos, exists independent from social actions or if it is influenced by the social actions related to interaction.

Guba (1990) states that the traditional belief system for research is positivism, which connects to the ontological stance of realism. The positivism paradigm implies the epistemological position to be objectivism and the existence of a reality external to the actions of social actors. Mostly the goal of research under this paradigm is to end up with an explanation, a generalization or laws. However, this is not the goal of this thesis to develop a set of basic laws which makes it irrelevant to adopt a positivist paradigm in developing this thesis. I will be using the system of belief known as constructivism as presented by Bryman (2012), which has the view: "…*that social phenomena and their*

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meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors…" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). This means that social actors create realities in their minds, thus making the world consist of multiple realities, meaning that an universal truth can never be established (Guba, 1990). The ontology of this thesis focus on realities that are created by the actions and human interactions of the social actors being researched, and it presents the perception of reality by all the individuals in this research (Guba, 1990). The phenomena of contemporary tattoo subculture has no universal truth to it, because it is relative to the people involved based on their impressions and ideas, as well as their beliefs related to this subject. The perception of tattoo subculture and the extent to which tattooed students identify with this subculture is defined by how the persons in focus have chosen to interpret the inputs they are given. Following this ontological stance, I believe that there are not absolute truth about the perception of contemporary tattoo subculture and the identification with this subculture. As a result of this, this thesis will not be focused on searching for one true answer but research the various attitudes from different people, which will be influenced by their perception of reality and their social world. As a researcher, I will also have my own perception of reality, and the communication between persons with different perceptions - the researcher and the interviewees - will guide and shape the research towards the production of knowledge on perception of contemporary tattoo subculture and extent of identification with the tattoo subculture.

2.1.2 Epistemology

The second part of describing the system of belief used in a research, is the description of the epistemology. The subject of epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and the known (Guba, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), explained by Bryman (2008, p. 27) as: "*…what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline…*".

The epistemological stance of positivism implies that the data collected in the research are often crude and described in a superficial way, and the researcher applies the methods used in natural sciences to the research of social sciences (Bryman, 2012), meaning that only objective data gathered by observation, or other methods relying on senses, can be accepted as knowledge. On the contrary, this thesis relies heavily on the subjective interpretation of the individuals.

This thesis seeks to research the perception of contemporary tattoo subculture, which is a subjective individual perception of reality, meaning that the thesis aims to collect data that cannot be observed. The feelings and thoughts of the individuals in this thesis makes it clear that an interpretivistic epistemological stance is required in order for me to be able to research the chosen topic. This thesis does not aim for the production of an universal truth about the topic, but rather gain a deeper understanding of the subjective interpretation of the individuals. The participants in this research can have different perceptions of the central themes and characteristics of contemporary tattoo subculture, depending on a number of different things, such as their belief, social relations and interpretation of reality, which possibly leads to different impacts on their intercultural communication with danish students. Furthermore, this thesis acknowledges that social actors have a remarkable impact on the world (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), and that to create knowledge on the subject it is necessary to interpret the minds of the participants, with the best method to doing so bring through dialogue and interpretation. This will be accounted for in the methodology section.

As mentioned in the introduction, the researcher has five tattoos, which implies that the researcher has already created knowledge of the subculture of tattooing and have created a perception of reality connected to his view on tattoos. The researcher acknowledge the fact that this only represents one perception of reality and that interaction with individuals within the interviewee segment are important in order to understand their perception of reality, thus creating knowledge about the subculture of tattooing. The researcher being tattooed provides the researcher with first-hand experience and knowledge on the subject, but it also makes the researcher biased in the creation of new knowledge, which is sought not to be influential on the creation of knowledge and the research.

2.1.3 Methodology

The third and final part of the paradigm, is the methodology of a research. Methodology is the field concerning the methods used for gaining knowledge within the desired area of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The considerations and choices related to the ontology and epistemology have a direct impact on the methodological choices, which will be accounted for in this section.

A positivist paradigm is, as mentioned before, focused on the collection and production of crude and tangible data, thus making it closely related to quantitative methods due to the sensorial nature of these methods and their aim for the production of numerical data   (Bryman, 2012). Unlike the the positivist paradigm, the constructivist paradigm is more focuses on the production of knowledge based on interpretation of attitudes, emotions and thoughts (Bryman, 2012; Guba, 1990). The methods used in this thesis are defined further in the research design section below.

The methodological considerations of a research are important to clarify, because it has an impact on the outcome of the research, which can vary depending on the methodological approach of the researcher to the research. This thesis is focused on producing data based on the interpretation of the attitudes and reasons of the participants in this study, thus rejecting the use of a positivt approach based on its focus on numbers, tangible data and patterns, as stated by Bryman (2012). This thesis endeavors to answering the problem formulation, meaning that the problem formulation is closely related to the methods used in this thesis. As attitude, belief and opinions are to be researched, a qualitative methodological study is chosen to best suited for answering the problem formulation. In order to do so, it is important to define the relations between the methods and the theory.

According to Bryman (2012), researchers are generally differing between two overall relationships between the research and the theory; deductive and inductive. In the deductive approach, theory drives the research by acting as guidance, while the inductive approach strives to produce theory as a result of the research. Because this thesis is focused on interpretation on human actions related to social studies, it is hard to define as consisting of either an entirely deductive or inductive relationship between the research and the theory. Instead, this relationship can be described as being within the nature of hermeneutics, described by Bryman (2012, p. 28) as: "*…concerned with the theory and method of interpretation of human action.*", and according to Guba & Lincoln (1994, p. 111), the paradigm of constructivism adopts a hermeneutical and dialectical methodology suggesting that: "*…individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents.*" As discussed in the epistemological considerations for this thesis, the aim of this thesis is an understanding of the interpretation of the participants on their membership of a tattoo subculture, which is suited to be researched using a hermeneutical approach, using both

elements of the inductive and deductive approach. The epistemological stance of interpretivism and the hermeneutical approach to research is closely related as they are both focusing on in interpretation, which means that they are supporting each other.This thesis is focusing on interpretation of the beliefs and attitudes of social actors, meaning that the hermeneutical approach fits this thesis well.

As the process of researching is progressing, the researcher develops a greater understanding of, and knowledge on, the subject. This is a process described in the hermeneutic circle, where the collection of theoretical and empirical data - primary and secondary - are constantly being reviewed by the researcher, in an iterative process. The generation of knowledge in a hermeneutical approach implies that the researcher move back and forth between problem statement, theory and empirical data in an iterative way; an example of this being the alteration of research questions or problem statement, based on the findings and knowledge created.

2.3. Research Design

The research of a topic is highly influencing the choice of research design, because a research design is a framework used for creating a structure for the collection of data and the analyzation of results (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The research conducted in this study is base on a single qualitative case study, which strives to create knowledge on the perception of global subcultural membership among university students and its affect on intercultural communication, from the perspectives of tattooed danish students. A case study is described as: "…*a strategy for doing research, which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.*" (Robson, 2002, p. 178).

This thesis is focused on studying the phenomena of contemporary tattoo subculture among tattooed students at Aalborg University and to what extent the tattooed students identify with this subculture. I feel that the topic chosen for this thesis fits the premises for case studies, based on the description of a case study being that it is used to explore and possibly understand a phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009) - in this case the phenomena of tattoo subculture among university students.

The relevance of the topic is described in the CCG introduction, which is based in the perception of a subculture with a subcultural style that is becoming increasingly popular - also among students attending higher educations. The perception of contemporary tattoo

subculture among these students is interesting because they have adopted the style of this subculture, but it is unclear if they share the values and characteristics of the subculture and if they are members while still striving for a achieving a higher education.

Researching the topic as a case study allows me to gain in-depth knowledge about the subject within its real life context. Prior to choosing a case study research design, other research designs were considered in order for me to be able to research the chosen topic, but in order to create an in-depth knowledge on this single subject, the case study research design was chosen.

Critique of the nature of qualitative study have also been part of the consideration upon choosing a qualitative case study. Qualitative research are accused by quantitive researchers to be too impressionistic and subjective, depending too much on the views of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the participants of the study (Bryman, 2012, p. 405). Furthermore, quantitative researchers argue that the impressionistic and subjective nature of a qualitative study makes it hard to replicate for other researchers. Bryman (2012) states that the researcher is the main tool of collecting data, which makes it hard separate his or her opinion on the subject - a belief I agree with, because it is difficult to replicate the exact belief of the researcher upon trying to replicate the research previously conducted. The researcher are often biased in some way or another, making it difficult to collect similar data for other researchers, who tend to focus on other things when conducting the same research.

Another critique of the qualitative research is that the results are often difficult to generalize into a broader context, because of the often low number of participants or responses (Bryman, 2012). On the contrary, this thesis follows the argumentation by Williams (2000, cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 406), that the individuals in qualitative research in fact: "*…can be seen to be instances of a broader set of recognizable features…*", what he calls *moderatum generalizations*. The data collected in this study is regarded as being general for large parts of the chosen segment; students attending Aalborg University.

2.4. Qualitative Interviews

The research of this thesis relies heavily on the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the subjects in focus, who are tattooed students at AAU, which makes it suitable to apply a qualitative research design and methods. In order to analyse these topics within the target segment, two qualitative methods have been considered; focus group interviews

and qualitative interviews. The focus group interview have the positive feature of supplying the researcher with opinions and thoughts that are jointly constructed through interaction within the group (Bryman, 2012). The group is allowed to discuss the topic of tattoo subculture and its meaning to them, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the topic for both the researcher and the participants, as the participants would be affected by the thoughts of other participants. However, this is also the disadvantage of conducting a focus group interview, as the statements from the participants are affected by the opinions of the other participants - a problem that is also mentioned by Bryman (2012) as the *problem of group effects*. In order for the interviewer to ensure that the participants within the segment in focus are not affecting each other and provides sincere answers, the interviewer would need to conduct the interviews in a more personal manner. Furthermore, the focus group interviews might cause discomfort for some of the participants, because they are not comfortable talking with others about their private life, which might apply to some when discussing their tattoos. Qualitative interviews overcome this discomfort by being conducted one-on-one, rather than with an interviewer and a group of participants.

After considering the advantages and disadvantages of focus group interviews and the qualitative interviews, semistructured qualitative interviews were chosen as the appropriate method of collecting data for this research. The use of this method will hopefully increase the trustworthiness of opinions by the participants, as they are not influenced by others when answering the questions. Furthermore, this method gives the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to the answers given by the participant in order to have something elaborated or clarified. As mentioned, the qualitative interviews were organized as semi-structured interviews, which means that it has a set of topics that need to be covered during the interview, as presented in the interview guides in Appendix 2 (English Interview Guide) and Appendix 3 (Danish Interview Guide). The questions within the various topics could be discarded in the interview, if the interviewee answered it in some way in the process of answering other questions. A semi-structured interview also allows the interviewee more freedom to add thoughts on the subject and the questions, which might give the researcher a deeper knowledge and understanding of the opinions of the interviewee; the thought of allowing the interviewee a degree of freedom is presented by Bryman (2012, p. 470) as: "*…'rambling' or going off at tangents is often encouraged - it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important…*". In addition to this the qualitative interview

allows the researcher to interpret the answers, which fits within the ontological stance of this research. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to add questions that are not presented in the interview guide, in order to create a deeper meaning of statements, thought and beliefs presented by the interviewees. The qualitative interviews possess the possibility of providing the researcher with new knowledge through the '*rambling*' of the interviewees.

The use of qualitative interviews as a research also involves some risks. Bryman (2012, p. 494) states that a risk of doing qualitative interviews, compared to doing participant observation, is the verbal nature of the qualitative interview resulting in the interviewees taking some matters for granted and not mentioning them to the interviewer. Furthermore, there are risks related to the interviewee holding back information or not telling the truth, but rather focus on what they think that the researcher wants them to say. A method to limiting the excess of this risk is to not tell the interviewees exactly what the interview is concerned about, but rather focus on the overall topic. The qualitative interviews of this thesis has been conducted in a way that allowed the interviewees a little knowledge prior to the interview about the topic of the interview, but not so much knowledge that their answers would not be sincere or immediate.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face to help the researcher interpret the verbal and physical reactions of the interviewee to the questions. This also made it easy to ask follow-up questions if the researcher needed an elaboration or clarification to an answer. The interview guides (English Interview Guide, Appendix 2; Danish Interview Guide, Appendix 3) show the topics and generic questions that were used for all interviews. The topics and questions are based on the findings of the research on classic tattoo subculture in the theoretical framework. The interviews were recorded to ensure the researcher would be able to remember the answers given by the interviewees, but also to allow the researcher to focus on elaboration and clarification if necessary.

The general attitude towards tattoos in early research indicate that the tattoo subculture is a culture in contradiction with the dominant cultures in which they are present (Sanders, 1985; DeMello, 2000). Combined with the fact that the tattooed part of populations in western societies are not dominant, show that tattoos can not be regarded as the dominant culture in western societies. This thesis is perceiving tattoo subculture as a global subculture - at least within the western world - thus meaning that this thesis is not focused in researching the tattoo subculture in relation to the specific national cultures of

the participants, but rather in regard to the diffuse dominant global culture of the western world.

2.4.1. Interview Participants

The participants for the qualitative interviews are found using the network of the researcher as well as the social network Facebook. The post on Facebook used for searching for the participants to the qualitative interviews is presented in Appendix 1. The participants are presented by their first name, nationality and area of study is presented to show the diversity of the participants of the interviews. It is important for the qualitative nature of this study to present the opinions and meanings of different nationalities, as it is aimed at researching the global phenomenon of tattoo subculture in the western world. The participants are primarily danish students, due to the fact that the research was carried out at a danish educational institution. Two out of seven participants are international students at Aalborg University; one from Romania and one from Spain, which suits the international character of Aalborg University.

The participants of the qualitative interviews are:

- Morten (Interview 1) from Denmark, studies Business Economics. Has 3 tattoos; all 3 placed on his upper left arm.

- Michael (Interview 2) from Denmark, studies Culture, Communication & Globalization. Has 2 tattoos; 1 on his upper right arm and 1 on his chest.

- Tudor (Interview 3) from Romania, studies Sports Technology. Has 3 tattoos; 2 on his back and 1 on his left calf.

- Katrine (Interview 4) from Denmark, studying Law. Has 3 tattoos; 1 on her right forearm,

- Sebastian (Interview 5) from Denmark, studying Mathematics. Has 3 tattoos; 1 on his forearm and 2 on his ribs.

- Maya (Interview 6) from Spain, studying European Studies. Has 4 tattoos; 1 on each wrist, 1 in the neck and 1 on the right ankle.

- Sara (Interview 7) from Denmark, studying history. Has 3 tattoos; 1 on each of her ankles and 1 on her thigh

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The interviews with the Danish participants were conducted in Danish to ensure that the interviewees understood the questions and that their answers were understood correctly by the interviewer. By doing so, the researcher might slightly enhance the quality of the data collected because danish is also the native language of the researcher. The interviews with international students were conducted in English as the interviewer did not speak the native language of these interviewees. There might be a small difference in the quality of the data, but the results should not be influenced by this as both the international interviewees and the researcher are fluent in talking in english. In both the danish and the english interviews, the researcher was very focused on making sure that the interviewees understood the questions and gave answers that were relevant to the research, but still allowing the interviewees to "ramble on" in order to be presented with new perspectives on the subject of tattoo subculture.

2.4.2. Interview Guide

The English Interview Guide (Appendix 2) and the Danish Interview Guide (Appendix 3) for this research have been constructed based on the findings of characteristics in the theoretical framework. The questions of the interview guide are divided into groups, depending on their relation to the theoretical framework and in order to create a deeper knowledge on the perception of contemporary tattoo subculture and the feelings of subcultural membership by the interviewees. The first main theme is the general perception of tattoo subculture, focusing primarily on defining and researching how the participants sees the tattoo subculture and its members. The second main theme is the interpersonal experience of being tattooed, which is solely focused on things like motivation for becoming tattooed, the importance of tattoos to the interviewees and the effects of social relations on becoming tattooed. The final main theme is the interpersonal experience of being tattooed, which is the perception of the interviewees on how western societies view tattoos and the feelings of cohesion by tattooed people to other tattooed people.

2.4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in social research seem to concern the same issues, which can be broken down to four categories; harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978, cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 135). As this thesis is concerned about beliefs and attitudes of the target segment and

does not involve subjects in risk of harming the participants, it does not posses any danger to the participants. Furthermore, the data collection method used in this thesis is qualitative interviews, meaning that the participants is not to be subject of any physical examinations that requires informed consent. This thesis does not invade privacy in collecting data, as the participants are free to reject to answer a question if they do not feel comfortable about it. Lastly, the qualitative interviews of this thesis does not require any degree of deception to show the true beliefs of the participants.

The participants of the qualitative interviews were asked if they would allow the interview to be recorded to be used for transcription, which they all agreed prior to conducting the interviews. As previously described, the use of recordings in qualitative interviewing enhances the quality of the analysis conducted after the interviews as the researcher is able to replay the exact interview, making sure that no point is missed in the analysis.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Reliability and validity are key factors when the quality of a quantitative research is assessed, but Bryman (2012) states that discussion has taken place among qualitative researchers about the relevance of these criteria in relation to qualitative research. Instead, he presents a position by Lincoln & Guba (1985; 1994, cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 390) to assess the quality and trustworthiness of a qualitative study to be based on four dominant criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria are important to assess throughout the study as it helps the researcher to increase the trustworthiness of the results of the study. As this thesis is of a qualitative nature, these criteria are assessed throughout the study.

The first criterion is **credibility**, which is concerned with how the study is carried out as well as having the results confirmed by the studies segment in order to ensure that the researcher have understood the social world in focus (Bryman, 2012). This thesis have been carried out in accordance with good practice, and the qualitative interviews have given the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to ensure that the social world is understood properly. Furthermore, the participants were presented with the aim of the study as well as how the researcher understood their attitudes and beliefs on the topics.

Transferability is the second of the four criteria, which is the degree to which the results of the research in focus can be transferred onto other contexts (Bryman, 2012). By making a thorough description of the context and the segment in focus of the research, future researchers are able to assess the transferability of the results to other contexts, settings or segments. The thick description of the subculture of tattooing and the contemporary segment being researched, is done in accordance with the theoretical framework, which provides future researchers with contextual knowledge to assess the results and its transferability to other contexts.

The **dependability** of a qualitative research is concerned with validation by auditing of the research by peers (Bryman, 2012). According to Guba & Lincoln (cited in Bryman, 2012), the dependability criterion is equivalent to the concept of reliability in quantitative research. Dependability does not seem relevant in this thesis, as validation of the results are based on the credibility done by the participants in relation to the interpretation of beliefs and attitudes by the researcher.

The last of the four criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of a qualitative research is **confirmability**. Bryman (2012) states that confirmability is concerned with the objectivity of the researcher, which means that the research should appear as free of personal bias as possible. The researcher should have confirmability as an objective of a research and not let personal beliefs influence the conduct of the research or the results of the research. This thesis is based on personal motivation of creating knowledge on a subculture that the researcher is a part of. However, it has been a clear objective of the researcher to not let personal bias and beliefs influence the research of the theoretical framework. Personal experiences have been used both as inspiration and for triangulation on creating knowledge on the subculture of tattooing, but it has never solely been the foundation of creating knowledge, as both primary and secondary data has been used in order to create the theoretical framework and to triangulate the theoretical framework. This was done to ensure a high level of confirmability, as the personal beliefs and experiences of the researcher could never create trustworthy knowledge on the subculture on its own. However, the themes in focus in the theoretical framework are chosen by the researcher which entails some subjectivity. This is also the case in the analysis of the primary data collected by qualitative interviews. This is further elaborated in the following section 2.6. '*Data Analysis*'.

2.6. Data Analysis

To analyze the data from the qualitative interviews, this thesis uses the data analysis method of thematic analysis, which aims to conceptualize the data of the qualitative interviews into themes (Bryman, 2012). These themes are then to be analyzed in order to answer how the participants of the qualitative interviews feels like a part of the tattoo subculture. Those of thematic analysis is a technique of unknown heritage, but can be discerned in other qualitative data analysis methods (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). To enable the researcher to outline the themes of the qualitative interviews, the thematic analysis creates a framework for the data analysis, designed to create an overview for the readers and researcher, whilst giving the data analysis a tight structure. The themes are found by analyzing the recordings of the qualitative interviews and from the themes of the theoretical framework.

The application of the thematic analysis entails a degree of subjectivity by the researcher, as it is solely the researcher who chooses the themes to draw from the qualitative interviews. The themes chosen by the researcher is based on the theoretical framework of the tattoo subculture and the characteristics of this subculture. As previously described, the interview guide is divided based on the characteristics of the subculture described in the theoretical framework, which provides the labeling of the themes. Other researchers might choose other methods for analysis depending on the chosen topic as the methods are chosen based on personal belief of what is best suited for the research question or topic in hand.

2.7. Source Evaluation

The use of the interpretivist paradigm, which entails a degree of subjectivity as previously described, means that the researcher interprets the sources based on subconscious beliefs, which is also the case in the interpretation and evaluation of previous studies and sources. As this thesis is constructed using multiple sources for gathering information about the tattoo subculture, because contemporary tattoo subculture is a diffused topic, the evaluation of these sources is an important aspect in writing this thesis. The commodification of tattoos have potentially caused the previous research on the topic to become outdated, as tattoos have gone from deviant behaviour to mainstream behaviour (Kosut, 2006). Furthermore, the bias of the researcher in relation to tattoos have the potential to be influential on the research, as a positive attitude

towards tattoos might guide the research in one direction, while a negative attitude towards tattoos might guide the research in another direction. This is particularly interesting in the case of the book '*Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community'* by Margo DeMello (2000), where the author has a tattoo, is married to a tattoo artist and generally have social relations within the tattoo community, possibly influencing the research in the book. This thesis has strived to evaluate the objectivity of the sources used, which is difficult due to the subjectivity of the interpretivist paradigm, but the subjective belief of the researcher have only influenced the interpretation of the studies and not the evaluation of the objectivity presented in the studies. The sources of this thesis have been reviewed by editors prior to their publication, which is regarded as a way of increasing the trustworthiness of the sources. The sources have primarily been collected by using databases such as Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com) and Aalborg Universitetsbibliotek (www.aub.aau.dk).

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework

The design of this section is to be seen as a funnel, working from a general description of theory on subculture, to the descriptive theoretical research of the tattoo subculture in the western world. The design is shown in Figure 3.1 below.
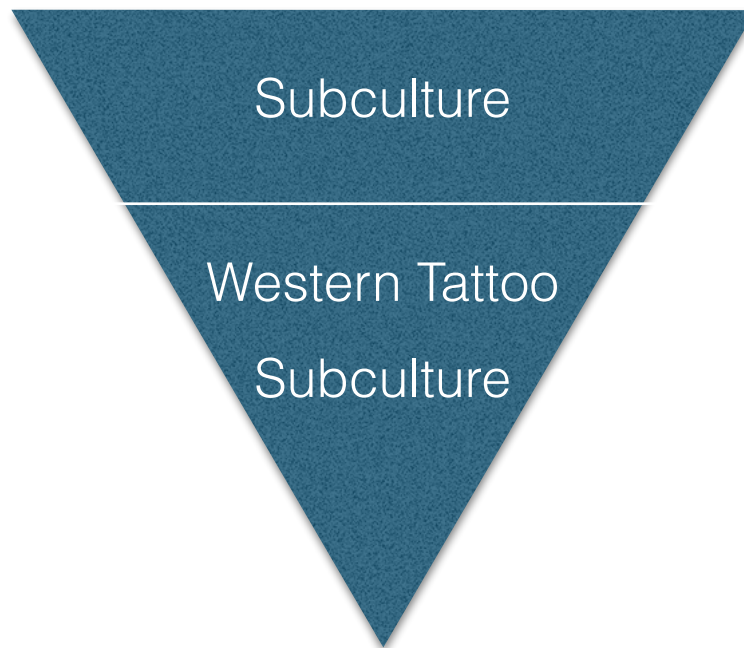

FIGURE 3.1 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK DESIGN (OWN CREATION, 2016)

By using a funnel design for the theoretical framework, the researcher is able to provide the reader with background theory on the topic before going into details with the specific topic of the thesis.

3.1 Subculture

The concept of subculture and subcultural theory is outlined in the following section to create a foundation for the research of tattoo subculture. Furthermore, theory on the commodification of subcultural style in mainstream society is included as a separate section, because of its significance in the commodification of tattoos.

3.1.1. Subcultural Theory

Subcultures can be defined as groups of people, who distinguish themselves from the dominating, or mainstream, culture in some way, by ethnicity, values, appearance, etc. The dominating culture is made up by shared behaviors and rules, with subculture rising from a conflict between the values of the dominating culture and those of the

.

subculture (Yinger, 1960). Dick Hebdige (1979) calls this: "…*a crime against the natural order…*" and a refusal to different aspects of the mainstream society. Furthermore, Phil Cohen (Hebdige, 1979, p. 77) describes this as a compromise found between two needs that are contradictory to each other; the need to be independent from, and to be able to identify with, a dominating culture. This compromise lead to the rise of a subculture, as it allows its members to identify with others, while being an exclusion of mainstream society. Hebdige (1979) uses the punk subculture as an example of this, because the punk subculture was a significant one in terms of style, with safety pins and leather jackets. The members of the punk subculture have no trouble identifying to each other because of this style and they have designed shared beliefs and values. According to Hebdige (1979), mainstream society fears the subcultures as they most often express resistance to the values of the society: "…*violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb…*" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 91)

Although the work of Hebdige (1979) has been recognized as one of the most influential works on subculture, it has also faced critique on lacking transferability to other countries (Mattson, 2001), as well as lacking sufficient scholarly research (Adler, 1982). As this thesis is not focused on the specific cases described by Hebdige (1979), but rather with his views on subculture, the transferability to other countries is not a concern in relation to the research in this thesis. The lack of scholarly research is also less important as this thesis acknowledges the wide use of Hebdige's work in various other academic researches as a sign of acceptance of the theories.

3.1.2. Commodification of Subcultural Style

In his book '*Subculture: The Meaning Of Style*', Hebdige (1979) presents the "normalizing" of subcultural symbolism, which is the process of mainstream society adopting or redefining symbolism from subcultures, that they previously viewed as challenges - a process, which Hebdige (1979) refers to with the term *recuperation*. The subcultural style was perceived by Hebdige as subversive and spread by "…*the process of production, publicity and packaging…*", leading it directly towards becoming fashion for the mainstream society. He argues that this recuperation comes in two forms; the conversion of subcultural symbolism into mainstream objects or redefining of deviant behavior by subcultures. The former is symbolized by the use of safety pins in punk subculture, which were later converted to mainstream objects as a fashion accessory,

while the latter is concerned with redefining deviant behavior because it no longer were to be seen as deviant behavior by the dominant cultural group. Commodification for subcultural symbolism were the adoption of symbolics as a trend by mainstream society, which makes it fail as an indicator of subcultural belonging and opens the door for consumers to adopt the significant symbolism of a subculture without the commitment to the group. In relation to the recuperation presented by Hebdige (1979), Frank (1997) made further research on the commodification of subcultural symbolism by mainstream society. He argues that it has been increasingly difficult for authentic "cool" to exist, since commodification of subcultural symbolism creates inauthentic symbolism used by mainstream society. The commodification of subcultural style also leads to "posers"; people who adopts the style of the subculture, but not the values and lifestyle, making them ""inauthentic". Hebdige (1979) describes this group as "hangers-on", who have varying degrees of commitment to the subculture, but borrows the style of the subculture as it has been commodified.

That tattoos have become popular can be seen in the number of tattooed persons in USA, where a Harris Poll in 2007 reported that more than 40% of Americans in the age of 25-40 had at least one tattoo; a number that was reported to be 3% 20 years earlier and as little as 0,5% 50 years earlier (Martin & Dula, 2010). An increase in the number of persons having a tattoo has also occurred in Denmark, where the number of persons having at least one tattoo have increased from 12% to 15% among people in the age of 18-74 years (Serup et al., 2015). Furthermore, the percentage of persons in the age of 18-29, with one tattoo or more, has increased from 10% in 2009 to 23% in 2013. It is important to point out that the percentages presented in the research by Serup et al. (2015) are the results of a survey involving 1.007 representatively selected persons in the age of 18-74 years, which leads to uncertainty about the correct percentage among the whole population of Denmark. Serup et al. (2015) also presents an estimate from 2012, that 13% of the population, or around 600.000 persons, had one tattoo or more, based on three researches; a panel survey by TNS Gallup (2010), a survey by YouGov Zapera (2009) and a record of patients on the Dermatological Department at Bispebjerg Hospital (Serup, 2010).

3.1.3. Characterization of Subcultures

It can be rather difficult to define different subcultures, because they present different variables in which they differentiate themselves from the dominating society's

culture. Gelder (2007) has identified six key ways in which subcultures have been identified and understood throughout history, which can also be applied to the subculture of tattooing as follows:

They often present a negative relation to work. The members of subcultures are often seen alienating themselves from mainstream society, which also means alienating themselves from the jobs of the mainstream society, based on their style, values or beliefs. When studying tattoo subculture, it is a rather distinct feature of tattoos that they possess a negative relation to work, as tattoos can influence the situation of applying for a job and result in the tattooee not being offered the position (Bekhor et al., 2007). This means that tattoos are looked down upon in relation to work, making it an alienating feature in regards to work for the tattooees.

They present a negative or ambivalent relation to class. Members of a subculture are often seeing each other as equal and pays no regards to class, social status, or other characteristics that might indicate distinction between them. Another aspect of this is also the choice of turning the social system upside down; idolizing the working class while demeaning the upper class. The tattoo subculture were mostly associated with sailors, criminals and other individuals with a somewhat deviant and 'lower-class' reputation in mainstream society. However, the transformation of tattoos towards a mainstream consumer good have resulted in it going across the borders of class, with people from the various classes of society having one (DeMello, 2000). Gelder The class border-crossing is also expressed in a quote by Albert Parry (cited in Gelder, 2007, p. 131): "…*when the ruling classes go in for tattooing, they are perfectly aware of the fact that slum dwellers, toughs, sailors and other plebs constitute the majority of the tattoo-fans in all the civilized countries. But they are not at all repulsed by this consideration. On the contrary, it is the subconscious desire of the upper class to borrow the primitive strength of the lower class*…"

They associate with territory (the 'street', the 'hood', the club, etc.). Subcultures are focused on territorializing in some form, for example when referring to neighborhoods, restaurants, street corners, etc. The territory of the tattoo subculture are the tattoo parlors, as they act as both the place for doing the rite of passage, but also as a place for hanging out for members of the subculture (DeMello, 2000). DeMello (2000) also presents the importance of tattoo conventions as a space for tattooees and tattoo artists to meet and celebrate their shared passion. Another perspective is that of Gelder (2007), who

presents the view of other anthropologists that tattoos will always carry with them their belonging to the civilizations of the pacific, making contemporary tattoos inauthentic and anachronistic, making the territory of tattoos the pacific civilization.

They move away from home into non-domestic forms of belonging. The alienation done by joining a subculture means that it can be difficult for members of subcultures to create or maintain a lasting bond to members of the mainstream society, meaning that they search for likeminded peers to socialize with. Goulding et al. (2004) describes three levels of tattooees related to their connection and dedication to tattoos, which is further elaborated in the section 'Western Tattoo Subulture', with committed collectors being the most dedicated to the subculture of tattooing. These committed collectors tend to search for social belongings with likeminded peers, and it is often difficult for them to engage in social activities with non-tattooed members of mainstream society as well as their families (Goulding et al., 2004). Sanders (2009) speaks of a connection between tattooed people, because of the uniqueness of the persons in their expression of unconventionality and separation from mainstream society.

They are tied to excess and exaggeration. This criterion is concerned with the display of subcultural belonging through style, language and behavior, which is most often exaggerated compared to the style and behaviour of the dominant culture. Punkers used safety pins as a subcultural style to symbolize exclusion from the style and values of mainstream society. Tattoos itself is an exaggerated body modification because of the permanency compared to piercings and most other body modifications, but it is also a display of separation from mainstream society by adorning the body; an act of hedonism. The extreme self-exclusion from mainstream society can be seen as exaggeration because the tattoos are permanent, which makes it difficult for the tattooee to reenter the mainstream society. Furthermore, it has been

They refuse banalities of ordinary life and in particular, of massification. The final criterion is the sum of the other five criteria, which concerns the self-selection of distancing from the dominant culture. This is similar to the refusal by Hebdige (1979) and Yinger (1960), in which the subculture arises from refusal of some of the values of the dominant culture. Tattoos have traditionally been viewed as a symbolic method of self-excluding or distinguishing the tattooees from mainstream society (Goulding et al., 2004). One of the alienating factors of the tattoo subculture is their negative relations to work, which is contrary to the perception of work life of the mainstream society. This criterion

might be under pressure because of the commodification and increasing popularity of tattoos, which have made tattoos popular in almost all social classes and environments (Goulding et al., 2004).

3.2. Western Tattoo Subculture

This thesis was chosen to be concerned with the western tattoo subculture, as most research of tattooing with a focus on subculture and consumption has been conducted on western societies, such as the research by DeMello (2000), Sanders (1985) and Goulding et al. (2004).

Sanders (1989, described in Gelder, 2007, p. 132) described tattooed people as a subculture, primarily due to their previous pathologizing and association with deviance by mainstream society and researchers, while others suggested that contemporary tattoos have no relation to tattoos as they once were (Turner, 1999, described in Gelder, 2007). This thesis agrees with the view of Sanders (1989, described in Gelder, 2007, p. 132), that tattooed people in fact could be seen as a subculture, but also acknowledges the view of Turner (1999) in terms of a different meaning to tattoos in contemporary society, as this thesis seeks to research how contemporary tattooees feel about their membership of the tattoo subculture, whose existence is acknowledged by Sanders (2009). However, by agreeing with Sanders, this thesis does not rule out the possibilities of people having other perceptions of what it takes to be a member of the tattoo subculture, and that they do not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture even though they are tattooed, as presented by DeMello (2000) in the following description of *Tattoo Subculture Commitment.*

3.2.1. Tattoo Subculture Commitment

There are different ways to categorize tattooees based on their commitment, which also means that there are different aspects on when a tattooee is a part of the tattoo subculture. Sanders & Vail (2008) represents the view, that all it takes to be a part of the subculture is to have tattoos. A person with a tattoo have gone through the same ritual - or rite of passage - as all other people with tattoos, which makes them belong to the same group of people. Furthermore, the act of becoming tattooed also entails a degree of self-alienating from mainstream society, which all tattooees have chosen to some extent, depending on the location and visibility of their tattoo.

Another way of distinguishing when a tattooee is part of the subculture, is by researching their commitment to tattoos. According to Goulding et al. (2004), the tattooees can be divided into three different groups, depending on their commitment to the tattoo subculture and their motivation for getting tattooed. This division of the tattooees show their commitment to the subculture of tattooing based on their number of tattoos, their placement on the body and their dedication to tattoos. The three groups are:

Fashion and aesthetic tattooees. Tattooees, who are often not concerned with the symbolic of their tattoo. They do not perceive themselves as a part of the tattoo community and are largely influenced by peer group referents and fashion trends in the choice of getting tattooed, placement of tattoo and motif. According to Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson (2005), people with fashion tattoos tend to feel less as a part of the tattoo subculture, and can even sympathize with the views of those who perceives tattoos as a symbol of deviance.

Committed but concealed tattooees*.* Experienced tattooees, who have tattoos for both personal and/or symbolic meaning. They have tattoos on large parts of their body, but refuses to cross the line of having tattoos that cannot be covered by clothes, such as the face or the hands. The tattoos grants access to tattoo subculture for the tattooees, but the possibility of concealment also allows the tattooees to engage in social activities without being faced with prejudice or stigma by mainstream society.

Committed collectors. Tattooees, who have chosen to dedicate their lives to tattoos and the subculture of tattooing, because of their extensive collection of tattoos. These tattooees most often cross the line of concealment by having tattoos done on their hands or face. Furthermore the tattoos are personal and the life history of the tattooees are shown through symbolic codes on the body. This dedication causes them to choose to be excluded from mainstream society and integrating into subcultural groupings, often with people from the industry or likeminded individuals, who are also members of the subculture of tattoos. Furthermore, the committed collectors are less likely to experience regret related to their tattoos as the tattoos have involved a high level of consideration or are more personal than impulsively purchased tattoos. However, Goulding et al. (2004) suggests that longitudinal research may reveal different reactions and a growing feeling of regret based in the choice of exclusion from mainstream society, which is also indicated in the article on motivation for contemporary tattoo removal by Armstrong et al. (2008). This article proposes motivation for tattoo removal as a result of a shift in identity

of the tattooee. Vail (1999, p. 260) describes the process of becoming a committed collector with the first step being that "…*one must first have an affinity for being a collector…*", which refers to tattooees needing to conceive themselves as tattooed.

Margo DeMello (2000) presents another take at showing commitment to the subculture of tattooing, which is by the use of *rituals* by the tattooees. DeMello uses the term community about the group of tattooees and tattoo artists, that self-select into this group, thus making it similar to the term subculture used in this thesis. According to DeMello (2000), the tattoo community is expressed in various forms through the use of tattoo conventions, magazines, cyberspace and in the increasingly number of tattoo shops. In another of her books, 'Inked: Tattoos and Body Art around the World', Margo DeMello (2014) states that even though a tattoo community exists, most tattooed people actually do not feel like a part of this community, and that it takes dedication and participation in key rituals of the tattoo community to become a member of this subculture. These key rituals starts with the obvious, which is the ritual of actually becoming tattooed - it is crucial for self-selecting into the tattoo subculture that you have a tattoo. Furthermore, she stresses the importance of having enough interests in tattoos to either attend tattoo conventions, to read publications about tattoos or do both, which are the rituals that she believes have to be done by the tattooees in order to be a true member of the tattoo subculture. With the increasingly digitalizing of conventional publishing, social media have taken over the role of conventional published materials, which means that following tattoo artists and/or tattoo parlors on social media is equal to reading tattoo magazines - one of the key rituals presented by DeMello (2000). The community membership proposed by DeMello (2000) are equivalent to the committed collector, as proposed by Goulding et al. (2004). DeMello (2000) argues, that to be a member of the tattoos community, it takes commitment to meet other tattooees, to actively search information and learning on tattooing and to live a lifestyle in which tattooing is important. DeMello (2000) argues that when attending a convention or reading a tattoo magazine, the tattooees feel like they have found like-minded peers, who are like them and not like everyone else. She states that tattooed people define themselves in opposition to non-tattooed people and society in general.

The proposed entries on how to categorize membership to the tattoo subculture have their advantages, but can be classified as too rigid for true categorizing of tattooees. The research by Margo DeMello (2000) was conducted during the 1990's,

which makes it necessary to be critical of the research, as tattoos have become increasingly popular and other factors are influencing the tattoo subculture. The increasing popularity of tattoos have possibly resulted in tattooees that still feel like a member of the subculture, but with varying degrees of commitment and dedication to the subculture, and without attending conventions and reading magazines. Furthermore, the research of Goulding et al. (2004) seems to leave out a group of tattooees, that have had tattoos done because of personal narratives, which makes it very dear and special to them, but who are not committed to the community.

3.2.2. Western Tattoo Subculture Characteristics

The identification of western tattoo subculture are based on a set of parameters, which is pointed out by the researcher to be characteristic for the tattoo subculture. The choice of parameters is based on a mix of personal experiences and previous research, so the parameters are also a mix of external and internal attitudes, opinions and feelings.

3.2.2.1. Intrapersonal - Self-definition

The definition of self by the tattooees are highly depending on their tattoos as they show who they are, while also displaying "uniqueness" (Sanders & Vail, 2008). Being different, and having a desire to be so, plays an important role in the self-evaluation of tattooees, as the ability to independently choose how to adorn your body, is a highly regarded feature among tattooees in the creation of identity through tattoos. The creation and expression of identity through tattoos are closely related to the section '*Motivational Factors*' below, as the initial motivation show the desired outcome of getting a tattoo.

3.2.2.1.1. Motivational Factors

Prior to conducting a research on a specific consumer subculture, there is a question that need answering; why do they choose to become a member of the subculture? Or, in the case of this thesis; why do people choose to get a tattoo? Researchers have argued that tattoos are no longer used for other purposes else than fashion (Turner, 1999, cited in Wohlrab et al., 2006), so in order to research the affiliation of contemporary tattooees to a classic tattoo subculture, it is necessary to look at the motivation for becoming tattooed. A possible link between the motivation for getting a tattoo and the feeling of membership to the subculture of tattooing is researched by asking the participants to elaborate their motivation for acquiring their tattoo(s), as well as uncovering their feeling of commitment and belonging to the tattoo subculture. Another

reason to why the motivation of the participants is interesting, is because this is where the tattooees and non-tattooees differ; the tattooees have a motivation for becoming tattooed that the non-tattooees do not have.

Especially their reason, or motivation, for acquiring a tattoo vary from member to member, but 10 reasons have been established by Wohlrab et al. (2006) through a thorough review of prior research on the topic. The ten motivational reasons vary from individuality to addiction, and they are described in the following paragraphs.

Beauty, art, and fashion. A tattoo can be purchased based on a wish to adorn the body, to carry a piece of art or because of a fashion desire. The authors of the reviewed literature generally agree that these factors can be compiled into one motivational reason, because of their close relation to each other (Wohlrab et al., 2006).

Individuality. A wish to express individuality are also stated as an independent motivational reason. This motivation can be based in a wish to create or maintain one's self-identity or to show distinctiveness, and Wohlrab et al. (2006) argues that it is considered to be one of the most important motivational factors, based on the frequency of the statements in the reviewed literature.

Personal narrative. Getting a tattoo can be the outcome of a desire to express experiences, repressed emotions and personal values, as well as being a rite of passage in one way or another. Atkinson (2002) also provides information on reclamation of their body by abused women, with tattoos becoming a method of psychologically healing their selves.

Physical endurance. Getting a tattoo is involving a great deal of pain, which can be motivating some people to have them done, as they wish to either test, or express, their own threshold for pain, and also display their courage towards being exposed to a great amount of pain.

Group affiliations and commitment. The self-chosen membership of the tattoo subculture might derive from a wish to enter other subcultures, as tattoos can be used to show affiliation and commitment to subcultures or groups. In the article, Goulding et al. (2004) also states commitment as commitment to specific individuals through symbolic tattoos, such as signs of love or friendships. According to Wohlrab et al. (2009), men are more likely to get a tattoo to show group affiliation compared to women, which is often

shown in the prevalence of tattoos in male-dominated competitive environments, such as the military.

Resistance. Getting a tattoo can derive from a wish to show resistance towards society or the parents of the tattooee. Research has shown that showing resistance towards the generation of the parents has a large impact on the motivation of adolescents to get tattooed.

Spirituality and cultural tradition. Tributes to spiritual beliefs can be motivational reason for acquiring a tattoo, as well as tribute to cultural tradition. Goulding et al. (2004) mentions *neo primitives* as a specific group of body modifiers, who pay tribute to the significance of historical and traditional body modifications by having the same body modifications.

Addiction. As described in the section of 'Physical Endurance', tattoos and other body modifications involves being exposed to a great amount of pain, which releases endorphins. This can be a physical explanation to becoming addicted to tattoos, but Vail (1999, cited in Goulding et al., 2004) suggests that a more psychological explanation can be that tattoo collectors find it important to remember and express their experiences, values or memories through symbolism on their body.

Sexual motivation. Tattooees might have a desire to express or emphasize their sexuality through modification of their body. In the article by Goulding et al. (2004), this motivation is largely focused on piercings.

No specific reason. The motivation for getting a tattoo can be of an impulsive character, meaning that there have been no personal reason for getting the tattoo and no deeper meaning to the tattooee.

In relation to the motivational reason to become tattooed, Sanders & Vail (2008) presents family, friends and others who the tattooees interacts with as an influencing factor in the process of becoming tattooed. The tattooee-to-be is influenced by the appearance of tattoos in their social relations, which encourages them to also get tattooed. The influence done by tattoo appearance show the social part of tattoos as a more acceptable environment increase the motivation for getting tattooed. Vail (1999) also describes this in relation to collectors of tattooing, who most often need social influence in order to choose to become collectors. The collectors must want to become a collector,

but they are heavily influenced by the appearance of other collectors, as they are building their understanding of themselves as collectors on their understanding and perception of other collectors.

3.2.2.2. Interpersonal - Interaction

The choice of becoming tattooed have consequences for the tattooees in relation to their interaction with others - both tattooed and non-tattooed. The presence of tattoos on a person is a mark of belonging to a special group, or subculture in this case, which can be a good thing in some situations. One tattooee presents the opportunities and socializing of tattooees like: "…*belonging to a club. I love seeing tattoos on other people. I go up and talk with other people with tattoos. It gives me an excuse because I'm not just going up to talk with them. I can say, "I have one, too."*…" (Sanders & Vail, 2008, p. 53). Another tattooee also speaks about the tattoos giving the opportunity to strike up a conversation with strangers: "…*having tattoos in some ways does affect me positively because people will stop me on the street and say, "Those are really nice tattoos," and show me theirs. We kind of ... it is a way of having positive contact with strangers. We have something very much in common. We can talk about where we got them and the process of getting them and that sort of thing*…" (Sanders & Vail, 2008, p. 53), which show another aspect of the tattoo subculture, as a social subculture in which you are able to interact with other members of the subculture, only because of the fact that you are both tattooed. Tattoos are not only a conversation-starter when approaching other members of the subculture of tattooing, but also interaction with non-tattooed people can be positive because of the tattoos (Sanders & Vail, 2008, p. 53).

However, sporting tattoos might also entail negative consequences for the tattooees when engaging in social activities with non-tattooed people. One tattooee mentions the comment "…*how could you do that to yourself?*…" (Sanders & Vail, 2008, p. 53-54) as a negative outcome of showing off tattoos when talking about tattoos with non-tattooed people. This might lead to people hiding their tattoos as they fear the response towards their tattoos - towards a part of their identity. Especially reactions from members of the mainstream confirmative society seems to be perceived negatively by the tattooees, as the tattooees sense that these people are not seeing this kind of behavior as acceptable within their norms - a subject that is further elaborated in the section '*Stigmatizing*' in this thesis.

3.2.2.2.1. Stigma In Society

"***…the tattooed person is variously described as "simple-minded," "immature,"***

"hostile," "aggressive," "self-destructive," "untrustworthy," and

"infantile"…" (Sanders, 2008).

The association of tattoos and deviant behaviour in the 19th and 20th century has affected the subculture of tattoos, by providing the subculture with a stigmatized reputation in mainstream society (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), which is also represented in the quote above by Sanders (2008). Tattoos have mostly been associated with deviant groups, such as bikers, sailors and criminals (DeMello, 2000), which have provided the art of tattooing with a somewhat negative reputation among members of the mainstream society (Adams, 2009). However, a review of the research on the view on tattoos following the increasing popularity, indicate that the stigma in society seems to be reducing as tattoos are becoming more popular among all social classes (Kosut, 2006; DeMello, 2000; Martin & Dula, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, having tattoos might affect the chances of obtaining employment in some areas, but there are more to this subject than just that. Time and popularity has affected the views of others on the job suitability of tattooees, as indicated in a research conducted by Burgess & Clark (2010), which showed that there were difference in the perceived job suitability of non-tattooed people and people with contemporary tattoos. However, it seemed that having a traditional tattoo design, such as Celtic or tribal patterns, were viewed upon with a more negative attitude towards job suitability. This might suggest a change in the historical clash between tattoos and work towards tattoos becoming more accepted as they have moved towards becoming a mainstream consumer good. The topic has been covered in an article by Rachel Hennessey (2013), about the shift in view upon tattooed employees, and how a positive view on diversity and qualifications have made it possible for tattooees to have a successful career, despite their tattoos. However, having a tattoo can still cause problems depending on the tattoo policy of companies and the style or placement of the tattoo, which could be viewed as offensive by customers or coworkers.

3.2.3. Problems In Researching Tattoo Subculture

Problems might emerge when researching tattoo subculture, as it is a subculture, that has underwent major changes since its days of being associated with deviant

groups, to the popular commodified good it is today (Kosut, 2006). Especially the popularity makes it hard to define the subculture of tattooing. As Goulding et al. (2004) states it: "…*it is no longer possible to classify consumers of tattoos on the basis of age, gender, subcultural activity or class, as increasing numbers from across the social spectrum are acquiring tattoos, all be it in varying quantities and for different reasons…*". As stated in this quote, it can be hard to classify the tattoo subculture, because the subculture is spread out through social classes. Tattoo subculture could previously be defined by the people having tattoos, as Sanders (2008) claimed in the first edition of his book '*Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*' from 1979, as the people who had chosen to be tattooed were significantly alienating themselves from society. This belief is challenged by Goulding et al. (2004), as people of different origin and settings are getting tattoos, making it more common to see tattoos, thus reducing the alienation from mainstream society. However, even though tattoos are getting more common, tattooed people still not make the dominant group in the western societies, as described in the introduction of this thesis, which makes it hard to define whether or not a tattoo subculture exists and how a person are to be considered a member of this.

Chapter 4 - Analysis

4.1. General Tattoo Subculture

4.1.1. Views on Tattoo Subculture

The participants of the qualitative interviews expressed very different views on the contemporary tattoo subculture in general. Most of the participants expressed a view on tattoo subculture as something that has changed in contemporary society, going from a more deviant form of self-expression towards a more commodified and mainstream consumer good with an increasing acceptance among contemporary dominant society - even those, who do not wear tattoos. One of the participants expressed his view on the increasing acceptance and change in values in society by using his own tattoos as an example: "*…I started by getting one on the ribs, because then I could always cover it, and later on I got one on the forearm, because I began meeting people in the service industry, where I see people who have sleeves on both arms for example, so I think that it […] is becoming more socially acceptable. It has always been this campaign of fear, that if you have tattoos up and down your arms, then you have difficulty getting work, and I think that is about to change…*"[1] (Sebastian, Interview 5, 00:25-00:52). This participant where careful in his choice of becoming tattooed, because he had the impression of a society that would alienate him because of his tattoos. Later on his impression changed, because of the increased consumption of tattoos, which he believes has made it more acceptable to have tattoos - a belief that is shared by almost all of the participants of this research, which is described further in the section *Commodification of Tattoo Subculture* further below. The participants of the qualitative interviews generally found it difficult to describe and pin down the tattoo subculture of contemporary society, as they found that the increased commodification had made it difficult to stand out as a member of the tattoo subculture rather than just being a person with a tattoo or a 'hangers-on'.

A theme that reoccurred in some of the qualitative interviews, were the description of the true members of the general subculture of tattooing as searching for the extreme, in

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[1] Translated from: *"…jeg startede med at få på ribbenene, fordi så kunne jeg altid dække den, og senere så fik jeg så på underarmen, fordi jeg begyndte at møde folk i serviceerhvervet, hvor jeg ser folk der har sleeves på begge arme for eksempel, så jeg tænker at det er ved at blive mere socialt acceptabelt. Man har altid fået den her skræmmekampagne, at hvis du har tatoveringer op og ned ad armene, så har du svært ved at få arbejde, og det tror jeg er ved at gå over, så nu tænker man at man sagtens kan gøre det sådan…"*

order for them to differentiate themselves from the increasing number of tattooed people; the people, who they might see as inauthentic compared to the true members. This search of extreme, or exaggeration, were brought up by some of the participants of the interviews, as they believed that the most dedicated members of the tattoo subculture would become heavily tattooed, but also by having extreme piercings, such as 'stretchs'[2], as mentioned by Sara (Interview 7, 01:23-01:33). One of the participants, Katrine (Interview 4, 04:23-04:30), describes it as: "…*that is also why it [tattoos, red.] is becoming more and more extreme, because we are used to seeing it and then it takes something more before it stands out…*"[3] To be able to still differentiate themselves from an increasing popular phenomenon, possibly on the verge of being mainstream (Kosut, 2006), the authentic and dedicated members of the tattoo subculture need to take more and more extreme measures to send a signal of being dedicated and separated from the commodification of tattooing. Gelder (2007) has included exaggeration and excess as one of his criteria for characterizing subcultures, which is confirmed by the participants of the qualitative interviews in this thesis, as the theme of exaggeration among members of the tattoo subculture was brought up by most of the participants. This show that the participants still acknowledge the existence of a tattoo subculture, even though they do not perceive themselves as a part of it, maybe because of the need for exaggeration due to the commodification of tattoos.

As a result of the increasing popularity of tattoos, and the search for differentiation by extremity, the same participants were asked if they believed that those, who perceives themselves as authentic, are looking down upon the tattooees, who they do not believe to be a part of the tattoo subculture; a form of hierarchy or classes. The "authentic" members of the tattoo subculture are perceived by some of the interviewees as being annoyed by the increasing popularity of tattoos - causing them to make the division of "us" and "them", as described by Katrine (Interview 4, 06:15-06:27): "…*because it takes more to make yourself stand out, and perhaps you get the need to split up into "us" and "them". "We are the right ones and you, with your googled tattoos, do not belong here*

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[2] '*Stretchs*' are piercings that are designed to deliberately expand the piercing hole by stretching the skin, making it possible to wear wide jewelry in the hole.

[3] Translated from: "…*det er jo også derfor at det bliver mere og mere ekstremt, fordi vi bliver vant til at se det, og så skal der noget mere til før at det skiller sig ud…*"

anmyore."..."[4] The existence of a form of hierarchy would be in contradiction with one of the subcultural criteria by Gelder (2007), which concerns a negative relation to class, but in the same criteria Gelder mentions an ambivalent relationship to class, which could be better suited for the tattoo subculture. Some of the participants perceives the tattoo subculture to be of a somewhat free spirit with no hierarchy, but still believes that the authentic members of the tattoo subculture look down upon other tattooees, who lack the commitment shown by the authentic members.

4.1.2. Feelings on Tattoo Subculture Membership

The feelings of being a member of the tattoo subculture or not, were very different from participant to participant, as some participants of the qualitative interviews felt like a part of the tattoo subculture, while others did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture. After having the participants describe their view on tattoo subculture, they were asked directly if they felt like a part of the subculture, that they had just described. The fact that most of the participants did not feel like a member of the tattoo subculture indicates that they have stolen the style of the tattoo subculture, thus making them inauthentic in the eyes of Hebdige (1979), but they might not be described as "hangers-on" as they do not spend a lot of time in presence of the authentic members of the subculture, such as in tattoo shops or at tattoo conventions. The definition of a "hangers-on" is not clarified by Hebdige, but the general description of a "hangers-on" is a person, who associates with a person or a group for personal gain (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

The participants, that felt like a part of the tattoo subculture, agreed with the definition by Sanders & Vail (2008), that all it takes to be a part of the tattoo subculture is to have a tattoo, because you have gone through the same ritual - or rite of passage. The two participants stated that to them the size of the tattoo did not matter, because it was the ritual of becoming tattooed itself, that defined the member of the tattoo subculture (Tudor, Interview 3; Sebastian, Interview 5). This seemed to be a single definition, as most of the interviewees did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture, even though they all had more than one tattoo. The general feeling among the interviewees, who did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture, was that you had to have the desire to really stand out and show dedication - either by attending tattoo conventions or generally show

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[4] Translated from*: "...fordi det kræver mere for at skille dig ud, og måske får du behov for at splitte op i "os" og "dem". "Vi er de rigtige, og dig, med dine googlede tatoveringer, hører ikke til her længere…"*

commitment to being tattooed, because it had almost become mainstream to just be tattooed. One of the participants expressed this by saying that: "…*it's like anything else - that when mainstream culture begins to take some of those sub-elements… Just because you put on a leather jacket on today, then you're not a part of the punk culture, or just because you put on a pair of pants with holes on the knees…*"[5] (Katrine, Interview 4, 02:15-02:27) This indicates, that just "borrowing" the style of the subculture does not make you a part of the subculture, which is rooted in the recuperation presented by Hebdige (2003), almost being extended to adopt the thought of Frank (1997), that true "cool" can be difficult to create and obtain because of the commodification of subcultural style. Interest alone can not be used as an indicator of tattoo subcultural membership as both people, that felt like a part of the tattoo subculture, and those who did not, were interested in tattoos in to some extent.

The beliefs among the partipants of the qualitative interviews indicated that being and feeling like a member of the tattoo subculture is highly individual, as diverse beliefs were presented by the participants on how to be an authentic member of the tattoo subculture. One agreed with Sanders & Vail (2008), that you only have to have a tattoo, while most of the interviewees would rather agree with Gelder (2007), that you would need an interest in the symbolic and history of tattoos to be a part of the subculture. Although agreeing with Gelder (2007), some would also acknowledge the view of DeMello (2000), that tattooees need to have a deep interest in tattooing, thus attending tattoo conventions to indulge in the various forms of the pratice. The ritualistic basis of membership presented by DeMello (2000) can be seen as an extension of the interest in the history and meaning of tattoos, but some of the interviewees did not feel that rituals were needed to be truly interested in tattooing. Katrine (Interview 4, 02:30-02:42) presented it as: "…*I think that if you go beyond that - and they want to, those who want to stand out with their tattoos - they do it by beginning attending conventions, or care about it, or get alot and then you stand out…*"[6] Most of the interviewees acknowledged that to be an authentic member of the tattoo subculture, one would need to be very dedicated and have a lot of tattoos, but Katrine lists three ways that she perceives that members of

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[5] Translated from: "*det er ligesom alt andet - at når mainstream-kulturen begynder at tage nogle af de der del-elementer til sig… Bare fordi man tager en læderjakke på i dag, så er man jo ikke en del af punkkulturen eller bare fordi man tager et par bukser på med huller på knæene*"

[6] Translated from: "…*jeg tror at, hvis man går ud over det - og det vil de jo gerne, dem der vil skille sig ud med deres tatoveringer - så gør de det med at de begynder at gå til messer, eller går op i det, eller får rigtig mange og så skiller man sig ud…*"

the tattoo subculture are trying to stand out; by having a lot of tattoos, by attending conventions or by being really interested in tattoos.

It is worth noticing that all of the participants have 4 tattoos or less, which fits the criteria for identifying a subculture by Gelder (2007), that involves the use of exaggeration and excess. Most of the tattooed students did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture, which confirms the thought that to be a member of a subculture, one would need to use exaggeration in the subcultural style in contrary to the style of mainstream society. The lack of exaggeration in subcultural style of the tattooed students further indicates that these students does not perceive themselves as a part of the tattoo subculture, which was confirmed by the fact that only 2 out of 7 participants would consider themselves as a part of this subculture. On the contrary, there seems to be no connection between the number of tattoos and feeling like a member of the tattoo subculture, since the participants, who perceived themselves as a part of the tattoo subculture, were not heavily tattooed. This contradicts the theory of Goulding et al. (2004) that a person, who is committed to the tattoo subculture, would be tattooed in large parts of their body. Furthermore, the definitions of tattoo subcultural membership does not seem to apply to the tattooed students at Aalborg University, because some of the participants, who did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture, had tattoos for personal reasons, and not based in fashion or aesthetics.

4.1.3. Commodification of Tattoo Subculture

Commodification of subcultural symbolism means that the mainstream society more and more accepts and adopts the symbolics and styles of subcultures, making it mainstream and increasingly difficult to be an authentic part of a subculture. Hebdige (2003) uses the expression *recuperation* about this process, and presents the punker subculture as an example of this, as the fashion industry adopted the studs in the clothing as it had been used by punkers as one way of differentiating from mainstream society; slowly making it harder to be an authentic part of the punk subculture. The same has happened to the tattoo subculture, as the increasing adoption of tattoo symbolic by all social classes has resulted in a greater acceptance among members of the mainstream society; a process that has also made it increasingly difficult for dedicated members of the tattoo subculture to differentiate from people who have adopted the style of the tattoo subculture. All of the tattooed students in the qualitative interviews of this thesis expressed that they were convinced that tattoos have been commodified by the

mainstream society. The students were very positive towards the massification of tattoos from a personal view as this would contribute to a greater acceptance of tattoos. The lack of refusal towards massification by the tattooed students at Aalborg University is a significant dismissal of a characteristic by Gelder (2007, Preface), which is focused on "*…their refusal of the banalities of ordinary life and in particular, of massification…*". One of the participants expressed the belief that the tattoo subculture might not perceive this massification as positive, as it would damage the true and authentic members of the tattoo subculture, making them push the boundaries in a search of extremity in order to continue to stand out (Katrine, Interview 4, 05:58-06:27).

The believes of the interviewees that tattoos have become very popular among mainstream society is also to be seen in the fact that only two of the seven interviewees of this thesis consider themselves a part of the tattoo subculture, meaning that the non-members either consider themselves part of mainstream society in opposition to the tattoo subculture - or as a part of another subculture or environment in which tattoos are part of the subcultural style; fitness, swimming or punk. The problems when researching tattoo subculture following the commodification of tattoos were presented in the theoretical framework, which stated that it had become increasingly difficult to label this subculture as the subcultural style, the tattoos, had been commodified, thus adopted by all levels of the social class system.

4.1.4. Subcultures and Sub-subcultures

Tattoos are not solely to be seen as an independent subculture, which the research in this thesis show. Some interviewees did not feel like a part of the tattoo subculture, but they had stronger affiliation with other subcultures, such as fitness (Morten, Interview 1), punkers (Katrine, Interview 4) and swimmers (Sebastian, Interview 5), where they expressed a belief that tattoos were part of the subcultural style. This might also have been the case of sailors, bikers and criminals in earlier research (DeMello, 2000;), as these groups might be seen as individual subcultures, who also happened to have adopted tattoos as a part of their subcultural style. The feeling of affiliation with other subcultures rather than the tattoo subculture mostly occurred among the participants, who did not feel like a part of the tattooing subculture, and who felt that to be a part of the tattoo subculture one would need to be very interested in tattoos and be interested in learning about symbolic, history and other aspects of tattooing. One of the participants mentioned her previous affiliation with the punk subculture in Aalborg, in which it was part

of the "uniform" to be tattooed (Katrine - Interview 4). She described the link between her affiliation with the punk subculture and tattoos as: "*…I was also a part of that punk environment and they had tattoos and piercings, so you just walked around waiting to turn 18 so you could get one…*"[7] (Katrine, Interview 4, 07:19-07:28). As described in the theoretical framework of this thesis, subcultures are highly distancing themselves from the social norms of mainstream society (Hebdige, 2003), so it is not surprising that other subcultures have implemented tattooing as a part of the subculture as a way of further distancing themselves from the conformity of mainstream society. Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson (2005) included the perspective of tattoo subculture and subculture with tattoos as part of the style, which can be seen in the below Figure 4.1. The figure shows, how tattoo subculture and subcultures with tattoos as part of the subcultural style, are both part of the overall tattoo system, according to Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson (2005).
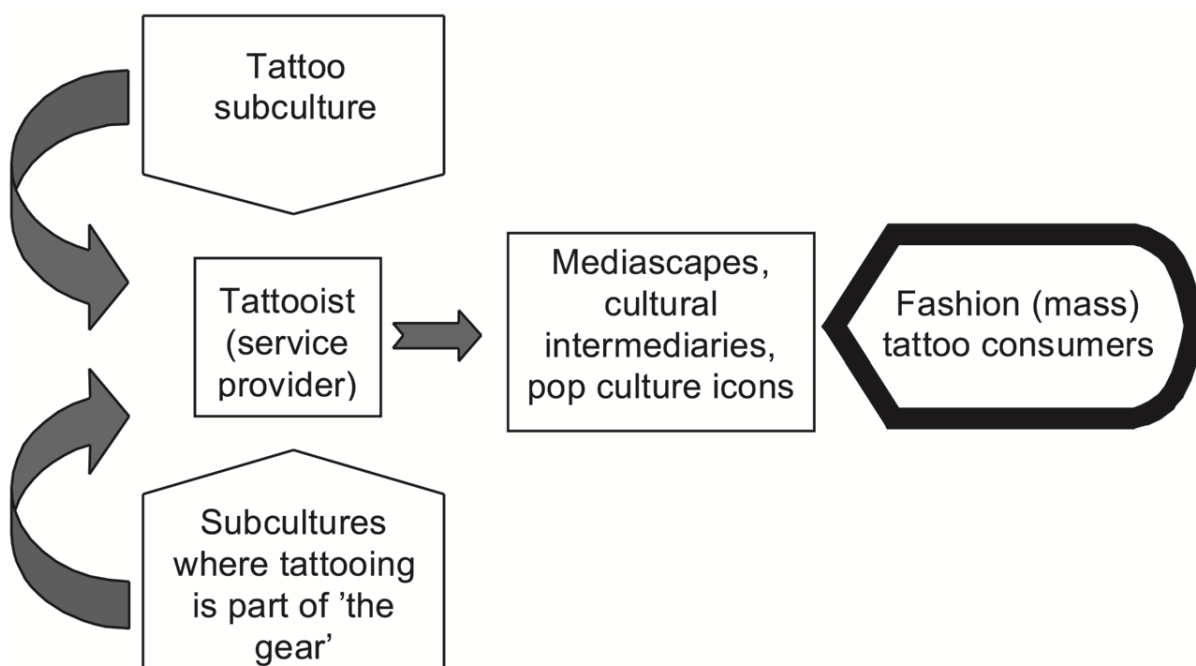

FIGURE 4.1. - OVERVIEW OF THE TATTOO SYSTEM (KJELDGAARD & BENGTSSON, 2005, P. 173)

It also seems that the commodification of tattoos and the following increase in popularity across social classes have made it increasingly difficult for tattooed people to feel connected to a general subculture, because they are struggling to identify with tattooed people that do not share their motivation for becoming tattooed or who have chosen another style. Instead, some participants feel a stronger connection to various

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[7] Translated from: "*…jeg var også en del af det her punker-miljø og der havde man jo tatoveringer og piercinger, så man gik bare og ventede på at man blev 18, så man kunne få en…*"

sub-subcultures of the tattoo subculture. For example, tattooed persons, who have chosen to have tattoos for personal reasons, might not be able to identify with people with authentic tribal tattoos. Morten (Interview 1, 04:01-04:09), who have tattoos symbolising his love to his family, explains it as: "…*if I see a person with a tribal, it's not because I think that it has any meaning, so I do not think that it is something that I can identify myself with…*"[8] Most of the interviewees perceived tattoos as an extended part of the self and as a expression of the personality of the tattooee.

4.1.5. Subconclusion

The series of qualitative interviews in this thesis indicates a great diversity in the perceptions of contemporary tattoo subculture and subcultural membership, with some beliefs shared by the tattooed students at Aalborg University, while other beliefs were individual or not generally shared by the participants. The views on what it takes to be an authentic member of the tattoo subculture were rather varied from student to students, but it also seemed that the feeling of being a member of the tattoo subculture were quite individual with no connection between the motivation for becoming tattooed, the number of tattoos and the feeling of subcultural membership. The students, who felt like a part of the tattoo subculture, based their membership on the fact that they had tattoos and did not base the membership on dedication.

As the analysis of the qualitative interviews of tattooed students at Aalborg University has shown, the participants perceive the subculture of tattooing in a way that is compatible with some of the six criteria of Gelder (2007) for subcultural identification, but the tattooed students, that were interviewed for this theis, show that tattoo subcultural membership feelings are deeply personal and individual, and it is hard to conceptualize the tattoo subculture among tattooed students at Aalborg University. A reoccurring theme among the tattooed students were their perception of exaggeration, or extremity, in contemporary tattoo subculture; one of the criteria of subcultures by Gelder (2007) where exactly exaggeration. However, the students did not represent this search for extremity, thus separating them from the tattoo subculture on this point. This was also significant in their perception of class, or hierarchy, in contemporary tattoo subculture, where the students expressed a belief that the true and committed members of the tattoo subculture

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8 Translated from: "…*hvis jeg ser en person med en tribal, så er det ikke fordi jeg tænker at det har nogen betydning, så jeg tror ikke at det er noget jeg kan identificere mig med…*"

would look down upon tattooees, that were less committed to the subculture, thus creating a hierarchy.

4.2. Intrapersonal Experience

The interpersonal experience is concerned with tattoos in relation to the tattooee, and evolves around the motivation for becoming tattooed, as well as the feelings of the tattooees towards their tattoos.

4.2.1. Motivation, Commitment and Social Influence

10 motivational reasons were presented in the theoretical framework, which might be applied to the choice of having tattoos. The interviewees expressed very different motivational reasons to becoming tattooed; fashion and aesthetics (Katrine, Interview 4; Sebastian, Interview 5), personal narratives (Karin, Interview 6; Tudor, Interview 3) and affiliation to family (Morten, Interview 1; Michael, Interview 2). The two participants, who did feel like a part of tattoo subculture, described their motivation to be fashion and aesthetics (Sebastian) and personal narratives (Tudor), which indicates that there seems to be no connection between the motivational reasons to becoming tattooed and the feeling og subcultural membership. The subcultural membership is hard to classify as it seems to be bound to personal belief on what it takes to be a member of the tattoo subculture. The motivation is not an indicator of when a person feels like a member of the tattoo subculture, as the subcultural membership feeling depends on the personal perception of the tattoo subculture in terms of commitment. The commitment to being tattooed is described by Goulding et al. (2004), with a scale of three levels indicating the amount of tattoos, the motivation and the location on the body. However, it seems that the scale is messy, as it mixes these parameters to outline the three levels. For example, it seems that the commitment is the overall parameter to describe the belonging to the tattoo subculture, but Goulding et al. (2004) seem to relate the number of tattoos to the commitment to the tattoo subculture, as a low number of tattoos means that they are fashion and aesthetics, while a large number of tattoos means, that they are committed but concealed or committed collectors. The dedication to tattoos are not strong among the tattooed students as they all would consider tattoos a lower priority compared to their career, which is described in the analysis of stigma and future career in the *'Interpersonal'* section below. The low commitment to tattoos makes the description by Goulding et al. (2004) fall short when trying to outline the tattooees, as most of the participants had

tattoos for personal reasons but where not committed to the tattoo subculture. It seems that a level is missing in order to label the tattooed students at Aalborg University.

Becoming tattooed were described in the theoretical framework as an act being highly influenced by social relations - people were more likely to having tattoos if friends or relatives had tattoos or displayed a positive attitude towards tattoos. This is most definitely confirmed in the case of tattooed students at Aalborg University as all of the respondents were influenced by their social relations; family and/or friends. For example Morten (Interview 1) and Michael (Interview 2) both mentioned members of their family having tattoos as a strong influencer on their choice to becoming tattooed, while Katrine (Interview 4) brings up her membership of the punk subculture and her friends in this subculture as heavily influencing her choice to become tattooed. Even though the social influence is present for the tattooed students in this thesis, they have not chosen to become collectors of tattoos as they only have a small amount of tattoos, all of them in places that can be covered. According to Vail (1999) this is due to the fact that they do not have the desire to become collectors of tattoos, as they have perceived what is takes to be a collector and they have chosen that they are not able to identify with this perception.

4.2.2. Conventions and Social Media

As described in the theoretical framework regarding tattoo subcultural commitment, DeMello (2000) states that to be an integrated part of the tattoo subculture, as opposed to the commodified part of the tattoo community, you have to attend tattoo conventions and/or read tattoo magazines. Almost all of the participants of the qualitative interviews had not attended a tattoo convention, nor where they planning to - mostly because the participants felt that you would need to have an extraordinary passion for tattoos in order to attend conventions. However, one participant (Tudor, Interview 3) had attended a tattoo convention, which he highlighted as a positive experience, because the convention displayed the different artworks of tattooing but especially the display of a primitive method of tattooing.

Also, the participants did not read tattoo magazines in any ways. However, an interesting perspective of the research were that almost all of the respondents used social media in some form in relation to tattoos; to be inspired, to look for certain designs or to simply admire the art of tattoos. The needs that were previously covered by tattoo

magazines seems to have relocated to social media and internet fora, which also provides tattooed people with a platform to communicate and discuss topics related to tattoos. The use of social media for tattooing is a feature that distinguishes contemporary tattoo subculture from traditional tattoo subculture, as DeMello (2000) refers to members of the tattoo subculture as persons who attend tattoo conventions and/or read tattoo magazines. Young people in contemporary society uses social media to a large extent, so it is no surprise that social media is also used in relation to subcultures - in this case to practice their commitment to tattoos to some degree. The use of social media in relation to tattoos adds an interesting perspective to the theory of DeMello (2000), that members of the tattoo community can be categorized by their use of tattoo magazines and/or tattoo conventions, as the fact that all of the participants used it to some extent makes it hard to overlook the importance to the new generation of tattooees in higher educations.

The definition of tattoo subculture members based on the parameters of attending tattoo conventions and/or reading tattoo magazines does not fit the interviewees of this thesis, and their own perception of their membership of tattoo subculture. All of the interviewees stated that they did not attend tattoo conventions or read tattoo magazines, but social media and the internet can be used in similar ways, that satisfies the same needs. However, the use of social media among tattooed students at Aalborg University is significant as it was used by all of the participants of the qualitative interviews to some extent.

4.2.3. Subconclusion

The analysis of the intrapersonal experience of the tattooed students of Aalborg University show that the motivation for becoming tattooed is not an indicator of the commitment to the tattoo subculture and the feeling of being a member of this subculture. The motivations behind the tattoos of the tattooed students are different from person to person, but three main motivational factors have been outlined in the interviews; fashion and aesthetics, affiliation and personal narratives. The choice of becoming tattooed is highly influenced by social relations as all of the tattooed students in this thesis were influenced by their family and/or friends when becoming tattooed.

Social media plays an important role for tattooed students at Aalborg University, because they use it in relation to tattoos, by either continually following tattoo artists or tattoo parlors, or by looking at specific motifs or styles. In this way, social media have

replaced the tattoo magazines, as they offer a platform for people with interest in tattoos and for searching specifically on styles and motifs. However, the use of social media cannot be used for describing subcultural membership in the same way that DeMello (2000) proposed consumption of tattoo magazines and attending tattoo conventions to be criteria for being a true member of the tattoo subculture. This is due to the fact that social media was used in relation to tattoos, both by those who felt like a member of the tattoo subculture and those who did not.

4.3. Interpersonal Experience

The interpersonal experience is concerned with the experiences of the qualitative interview participants in relation to society and other people in general within the scope of tattoos. The themes of the interpersonal experiences are primarily focused on the affect on stigmatization caused by the commodification and increased popularity of tattoos in western cultures.

4.3.1. Stigmatizing

Following the self-chosen alienation from mainstream society, tattooees have previously experienced stigmatizing from non-tattooed members of this society. The interviewees of this thesis are experiencing a mostly positive attitude towards their tattoos from the non-tattooed parts of mainstream society, and they feel that the commodification of tattoos have shifted the attitude towards this positive attitude. A possible outcome of the increased popularity of tattoos would be a much greater acceptance of tattoos among all social classes and in all social environments. According to the tattooed students at Aalborg University, tattoos are no longer alienating the tattooee from the mainstream non-tattooed society, as it is much more normal to see tattoos on people in western societies.

Almost all of the interviewees expressed a belief that stigmatizing of tattoos were an act of older generations and that tattoos was more accepted by younger generations, which was the consequence of the commodification of tattoos in mainstream society. One of the participants described his own feelings of overcoming stigmatizing from older generations, as he would be met with negativity when revealing his tattoos, but as soon as he described the deep personal meaning of the tattoos to himself, the negativity would most often be limited or gone. His tattoos are based in showing affiliation and love to his family, which he believes is the key to the greater acceptance of his tattoos. He describes it as: "…*the older generation [have] been a little skeptical about the very act of getting*

tattoos, but when they hear why they are there, they seem to actually find it acceptable. And some even think that it's nice…"[9] (Morten, Interview 1, 27:48-28:01).

4.3.2. Tattoos in a Future Career

Tattoos have been exposed to stigma throughout history - mostly based in their association with deviant subcultures and groups (Adams, 2009) - which have resulted in tattoos having a bad reputation in work spaces and especially in the service industry. Although this might not be the case anymore (Hennessey, 2013), the participants in the qualitative interviews of this thesis expressed that they had gone through considerations on the implication of tattoos on their future careers. One of the participants stated that he did not want to have tattoos below the elbow, because he had already made a choice of where he would like to have a career, and tattoos would not be accepted in that specific industry (Morten, Interview 1).

All of the interviewees stated that they would not prioritize tattoos over their job, and most also stated that their future plans for tattoos were influenced by their potential job and the implications caused by tattoos on their possibility of landing the job or causing problems in their daily work. One of the subcultural criteria by Gelder (2007) is the negative relation to work, which is seen in these answers in the fact that the tattooees still fear that their tattoos might cause problems in the workplace. This indicates that, although the interviewees believes that society is becoming more positive towards tattoos, they are still being oppressed by the stigma felt in traditional tattoo subculture. The interviewees would be willing to cover their current tattoos, if it was required in their future career, although some expressed a hope for their skills to be more important than their tattoos, meaning that they hoped that people did not care if they have tattoos as long as they were good at their job. The social acceptance of tattoos, both in the workplace and in society, might contribute to tattoos becoming a more common sight in various workplaces. The tattooed students did not fully dismiss the criteria be Gelder that subcultures present a negative relation to work, because they are still aware of the possible negative outcomes of their tattoos on future careers, but they are still convinced that they commodification of tattoos are contributing to the reduction of the negative

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[9] Translated from: "…*den ældre generation [har] været lidt skeptiske overfor selve det at få tatoveringer, men når de så hører hvorfor de er der, så synes de faktisk at det er acceptabelt. Og nogen synes ligefrem at det faktisk er flot…*"

relations to work, which also means that they are expressing hope for the tattoos to be less of a subcultural phenomenon to a more mainstream act.

4.3.3. Connection to Other Tattooees

As described in the theoretical framework for this thesis, Sanders (2009) wrote about tattooees having a special connection to each other based on the fact that they had tattoos. The participants of the qualitative interviews were presented with this statement and asked what their opinion was on this matter, which resulted in different responses. The participants acknowledged the presence of a connection between tattooees because of the shared interest in tattoos, but most of the respondents did not have a stronger tendency to initiate communication with a tattooed person compared to a non-tattooed person. Sebastian (Interview 5, 11:54-12:02) explains it: "…*you notice it when you walk around and you see people with tattoos, but it's not that I would say that I have stronger connection to them than others*…"[10], which is also the most common view of the participants. The connection between tattooed people was presented by Sanders & Vail (2008), who had interviewees describing the connection as belonging to the same "club", and that tattoos could be a way of starting a conversation with other tattooees. This is an opinion that is not shared by the tattooed students in this thesis, as only one of the participants expressed this opinion (Karin, Interview 6, 22:43-22:49): "…*it's another way of having a connection and to start a new conversation with somebody that you dont know*…". This is the same opinion as expressed by the interviewees in the research of Sanders & Vail (2008), that the tattoos are a way of starting a conversation. Karin (Interview 6) was the only interviewee in this research to express this opinion, meaning that the most common belief on the concept of tattooees having a special connection to each other is that it is nonexistent among the tattooed students at Aalborg University.

4.3.4. Subconclusion

Even though the interviewees represent a contemporary group of tattooees, they are still fearing the stigmatizing experienced by members of traditional tattoo subculture in earlier times. They feel that the mainstream society is accepting tattoos, and even adopts the symbolics and style of tattoo subculture, but they are still aware of the stigmatizing towards tattoos by mainstream society. The participants would not allow their

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[10] Translated from: "…*man lægger mærke til det når man går rundt og man ser folk med tatoveringer, men det er ikke sådan at jeg vil sige at jeg har stærkere forbindelse til dem end andre*…"

tattoos to be an obstacle in their future careers, although some expressed hope for the increased popularity of tattoos to contribute to an even greater acceptance of tattoos in the workplace. Most of the participants of this study did not feel any special relation to other people with tattoos, which might be related to their belief of not being a member of the tattoo subculture. Some of them acknowledge that they notice other people with tattoos which could be because of a general interest in tattoos. The negative relation to work, which were a criteria for subcultures by Gelder (2007), seems to be considered outdated and related to tattoo subculture in the past, according to the tattooed students at Aalborg University, as tattoos today are no longer exposed to the same stigmatizing as previously experienced by members of this subculture.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

The problem statement of this thesis was how tattooed students at Aalborg University perceived contemporary tattoo subculture and to what extent they identified with the tattoo subculture.

How do the tattooed students at Aalborg University perceive the contemporary tattoo subculture?

The tattooed students perceive the contemporary tattoo subculture as a subculture that have changed a lot compared to the traditional tattoo subculture. The belief of the students is that the commodification of tattoos have contributed to this, as it has become increasingly difficult for the members of the tattoo subculture to exude their membership of the tattoo subculture following the spread of tattoos to all social classes. The students believed that a result of this was that the authentic members of the tattoo subculture are becoming increasingly extreme in the adorning of their body - in the context of both tattoos and other body modifications - in order to be separated from people, who are not authentic members of the tattoo subculture. Furthermore, most of the participants perceived the contemporary tattoo subculture as being divided into sub-subcultures based on designs or styles, because of the increasing popularity of tattoos. Besides the problems of being authentic for the true members of the tattoo subculture, some of the interviewees also expressed their belief, that the increasing popularity and spread of tattoos are leading to somewhat of a clash between the authentic members and tattooed people, who are not perceived as authentic. This clash involves the authentic members to look down on people in the outskirts of the tattoo subculture, meaning that there might be some sort of hierarchy within the tattoo subculture, or at least among tattooed persons.

To what extent do the tattooed students identify with the tattoo subculture?

To research the extent to which the tattooed students at Aalborg University identifies with the tattoo subculture, this thesis focused on the perception of tattoo subculture as well as the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences to conclude where the students identified with the characteristics of the tattoo subculture and where they did not identify with the characteristics.

The massification of tattoos were believed to have caused the tattoo subculture to become divided into sub-subcultures as the students found it increasingly difficult to

identify with the tattoo subculture, but also with other tattooees that were not part of the tattoo subculture. The experience of the students and their perception of the tattoo subculture show that most of the students do not consider themselves a part of the tattoo subculture, and their perception and experiences of being tattooed indicates that they should not be considered members of this subculture. This is due to a number of reasons:

- They do not feel any connections to the subculture or its members, nor do they feel committed to tattoos and tattoo subculture, and they believe that it would require a larger interest in tattoos than they possess.

- They do not refuse ordinary life as they are prioritizing their careers over tattoos.

- They do not consider their current tattoos to have an negative impact on their future career.

- They do not exaggerate their body adornment, as well as they believe the members of the tattoo subculture do.

- They have a positive attitude towards the massification of tattoos and the acceptance this massification - an attitude that they believe stand in contrary to the attitude of the tattoo subculture.

- They believe in the existence of a hierarchy among tattooees and within the tattoo subculture followed by the massification of tattoos.

However, the tattooed students also expressed identification with the tattoo subculture on some points:

- They were using social media in the same way that traditional tattoo subculture used tattoo magazines as described by DeMello (2000), which were based on an interest in tattoos and to be inspired.

- They also felt the stigmatizing of tattoos from mainstream society in some ways similar to the way experienced by the tattoo subculture.

- They are heavily influenced by social relations in the choice of becoming tattooed.

The tattooed students at Aalborg University is almost not identifying with the contemporary tattoo subculture, as their perception of contemporary tattoo subculture stand more or less in opposition to their own experiences and beliefs.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

During the analysis of the qualitative interviews, as well as during the outlining of the conclusion, it became clear to me that I had partially failed to implement the six characteristics of subcultures by Gelder (2007) into the questions of the interview guides, which had influenced the outcome of the interviews as well as the analysis. Reviewing the theoretical framework compared to the interview guides, I noticed that some of the six characteristics were not being researched, which is a regret of mine, as I should have allowed the six characteristics to guide the research and be the main theory for researching themes and characteristics related to contemporary tattoo subculture. The criteria that I believe are lacking in the research are the association with territory and the movement towards non-domestic social forms (Gelder, 2007, Preface). I reckon that the reason for this was that I, as a researcher, did not find these criteria interesting in the context of the tattoo subculture, which might have been a mistake, as these criteria could have helped to create a deeper understanding of the tattoo subculture and the position of the tattooed students on themes central to this subculture. These thoughts came to my mind on a time where it was not possible to implement into the research, as the qualitative interviews had already been conducted and the time available did not allow for new interviews to be conducted, as I reckoned that new interviews would also need new participants. Instead I have accepted the lack of research on the before mentioned criteria, and sought to create a thorough understanding of the perception and experience of tattoo subculture from the interviews already conducted. A larger influence of the six criteria on the interview guides could possibly have created another result, but the criteria already researched indicated that the perception of tattoo subculture of the participants created an image of a subculture in which they did not feel like a member as they did not allow the tattoos to become the main priority in their lives.

Further research on the topic of tattoo subculture, that were not compatible with the focus of this thesis, is the research of tattoo subculture among members of the tattoo environment, such as tattoo artists and people associated with tattoo shops. The themes of this thesis and the results could be interesting to compare to the results of a research conducted in this environment. Furthermore, it could be interesting to research the perception of tattoo subculture among this group, as is has become increasingly difficult to separate members of the tattoo subculture with tattooees that are just dedicated to tattoos - mostly because it is difficult to establish what it takes to be a part of the tattoo

subculture, as the results of this thesis also revealed. It is difficult to establish whether it is motivation, commitment or something third that should be the marker of subcultural membership - it might be a combination of two or more parameters. This aligns well with the beliefs of researchers working under the constructivism paradigm, as it seems to be dependent on the perception and interpretation of the reality experienced by individuals. To ensure transferability of this thesis in order to compare the results between tattooed students and people working in the tattoo business, it would be necessary to transfer the themes and the questions of the interview guides to the new research.

Chapter 7 - Formalities

List of Figures

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