Tattooing in Hong Kong - From Past to Present; In and Out

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**Introduction**

Tattooing has a long history of a triad symbol, which is mainly due to the media portrayal in Hong Kong movies. Recently, tattooing becomes more common and prevalent in the society, across gender and generations, for different reasons and purposes. Yet, it is more common for the general public to stare at or look at those tattooed people differently. When we walk past a stranger with a large and obvious tattoo around the forearm, we may take a step back and maintain reasonable distance with the person, or stare at the person in an unfriendly way. It may not happen to all, yet these reactions may be due to our negative perception and deep-rooted understanding towards tattooing.

The meanings and identities of the tattooed minority are dynamic and keep changing, but the perception of the dominant group (public), on the contrary, is static and a stigma on tattooing still persists in the society. This study aims at promoting mutual understanding between the insiders and outsiders of the tattooing world in Hong Kong, and eventually de-stigmatize tattooing in Hong Kong.

**Literature review**

To begin our research, we would like to review some existing literatures and theories on the study of tattooing in the following four areas. Here, we have to be aware of a limitation in this literature review that there are minimal literature on tattooing in Hong Kong. Thus, our literature are from Western countries, which could also serve for the generations of interview questions, a basis for our research on tattooing in the context of Hong Kong, as well as a view into the theoretical and historical approaches on this topic.

In the post-1997 period, tattoos have become symbols of sub-culture of being like gangsters. Tattoos were linked to self-stigmatization with violence and making tattoo as a form of deviant behavior (Ma, 2002). Deviance and stigma are socially perceived within a context and depends on social norms (Yang et al., 2007). DeJong (1980) explained that characterological stigma refers to those who acquire their deviant status through the commission of deviant acts, such as being tattooed. Tattoo carries social stigma and deviance, which is historically and socially developed. Tattoo has a historical association with deviance and marginality and it also serves as
a label of deviant status (Adams, 2009). First, historically, tattoos signified some kind of social deviance in the Western world since it was generally associated with working class, prisoners, sailors, savage races, blue-collar, etc. (Kosut, 2006). Due to the prevalent association of tattoos with marginal social groups and its status as an indicator of deviance, tattooing has been strongly defined as a deviant practice (Sanders, 1989). Later, criminals voluntarily tattooed themselves as a means of constructing an idea of otherness. In addition, Lombroso, who focused on individual characteristics in deviance, suggested that tattooing was a primitive and degenerate trait of criminals and lower classes (Bradley, 2000), and those less sensitive to physical pain are more likely criminals, which therefore support the propensity of tattooed criminals (Caplan, 2000). Hence, tattoo has become markers of the status of otherness that signify the subject’s social difference with its historical and social background (Prosser, 2001).

The concept of subculture is used to understand the otherness of the tattoo group which is seen as one of the non-normative group in Hong Kong society. According to Erin, a subculture consists of a group of individuals who distinguish themselves from the overriding culture in some way, whether it be ethically, morally, visually, attitudinally, etc. Actually, subcultures are dynamic with time which gives new meaning to the everyday objects. Bricolage was carried out in which means “the use of something for something other than its original intended use.” (Erin, 2010, p.4). Using tattoo in the 1970s to 1980s in the American society as an example, it was seen as “no good” by the mainstream and only gang members and criminals had tattoos. Yet, tattoos have gained acceptance due to the countercultural revolution and people started searching for new outlets of expression, which have made tattoo more commonly accepted in the American society. Although society reject tattoo at the beginning which saw it as an unconventional art, the shock factor dies down because people accustomed it. There are two reasons to explain the acceptance of the subculture. With the explanation of Erin, the first one is the commodification of the subcultural objects which are converted into mass-produced objects. The second reason is the redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups which means that once the style is adopted as a trend by mainstream society, the subculture identity will be lost. The commodification and the redefinition of the meaning of tattoo can be found in American society which lead to the higher acceptance of tattoo in the US society. In order to maintain the subculture identity of tattoo, a part of the people would have full body tattoos, face tattoos, hand tattoos, etc. in order to shock society. As the result,
the placement of one’s tattoo and the images used in the tattoo are the important factors to
determine the subculture identity of tattoo bearers nowadays (Erin, 2010).

During the Tattoo Renaissance in the 1980s, tattooing was re-imagined and tattoo art has
infiltrated the mainstream and fine artists have begun to see tattoo as a legitimate artistic work
(Irwin, 2001). Mainstreaming of tattoo art has been fueled by the growing number of tattooed
public figures and positive media representation which thus gradually removing the notions of
stigma and changing the focus to some personal meanings and custom piece of artwork (Larsen,
Patterson & Markham, 2014). Given the invention of electric tattoo machine and its improvement
in hygiene and professionalization in the industry, tattooing as a body art has moved closer to
acceptance and away from its association with deviance (Adams, 2009). With the permanent
characteristic of tattoo, tattoo functions as a narrative that enable life stories to be told, as a symbol
of personal growth, life events and individualism and as an important feature of affect management
through which individual overcome emotions of pain and stress (Atkinson, 2003). People started
to relate tattoo to body art and fashion and then to have a diminishing view on its presumed
association with deviance (Adams, 2009). Hence, tattoo tends to be re-contextualized when it
becomes more commonly practiced as a form of self-expression and fashion (Adams, 2009). And
the transition of tattooing makes progress gradually from deviance and stigma to artistic pursuit
and self expression through the Tattoo Renaissance in the Western world.

According to Botz-Bornstein (2013), tattoos are positively correlated with masculinity and
male traits, hence tattooed women are socially recognized as not being ladylike. In addition, in
male-dominated world, smoothness of female body is required in a sense for the male to control
the women body, since tattooed female skin disrupts the creation of male desire in exerting control,
which thus is socially not accepted by the majority of society (Botz-Bornstein, 2013). As a result,
tattooed women have a greater potential to be stigmatized due to the cultural rules about the
gendered body (Atkinson, 2002).

Not only does tattooing differ between genders, but also fractions within each gender and
fractions within each reason for collecting tattoos. These inter-embeddedness of fractions and sub-
fractions among tattoos could help reaffirm that there are various reasons and types of people in the world of tattooing.

Gender and sex are two different concepts in sociology, where “Sex” is generally referred to a characterization of men vis-a-vis women by reproductive organs and secondary sex characteristics. Thus, it is objective. On the other hand, gender refers to the sex one identifies himself or herself with (Hill, 2016) - sex is the natural basic attribute which incites a person’s identification with a gender. For a widely adopted definition by the World Health Organization, "gender” comprises the set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes a particular society considers appropriate for men and women. (WHO, 2017). The attributes of "masculine” and “feminine” are thus derived from this concept of “gender”. In short, gender is one’s identification with a particular sex and the set of socially-endorsed appropriate behaviors associated with that particular gender.

For the perceptions on each gender having tattoos, contradictory findings were found. Firstly, there are different receptions on each gender being tattooed. It has been found that there was far more acceptance of men possessing tattoos compared to women (Swami & Furnham, 2007). Another example could be retrieved from Demello (2000). One of the interviewees of her study, a mother, revealed her tattoos while going out with her kids, and immediately inciting the impression she might be the babysitter instead of a mother, as people did not agree a mother should have any tattoo on her body.

One possible reason for such a perception is proposed in Swami & Furnham’s work (2007) - female roles in a patriarchal society, are portrayed as held to conform to their gender roles, which are conserved, gentle and “decent” wives and mothers who should not have any conspicuous body adornment. Women are restrained to more informal social roles under the power of men, in which women are usually the subordinate.

On the other, a completely opposite finding on the perceptions has been discovered. Another study revealed no difference in the perceptions of different genders (Hill, 2016). When the dummy tattoo bearer Taylor who interviewees express opinions on in the study, is a girl, there
was no significant effect to the four dependent variables of potential occupational success, likability/similarity, sexual promiscuity/risk-taking and perceived liberal/conservative/religiousness.

Secondly, purposes for collecting tattoos are reviewed, which can be divided into two prominent reasons. The first is to express control over oneself (Demello, 2000; Thompson, 2015), largely to escape from societal constraints, in particular, from patriarchal constraint. In the study by Margo DeMello (2000), a particularly gendered motivation for collecting tattoos was discovered. She wrote in this work that “women . . . are much more apt to explain their tattoos in terms of healing, empowerment, or control. I have not had any straight men report to me that they acquired a tattoo as a means of regaining control over their life while undergoing a crisis.” (p.232). This particularly gendered motivation incites us to wonder if it has anything to do with the constraints under patriarchy aforementioned - to have autonomy from husbands and families? Again, it awaits to be proved. Nonetheless, an outstanding motive of resistant femininity has been depicted by (McRobbie & Thornston, 1995). In the study, two major motives of women collecting tattoos are distinguished. One is the adoption of masculine patterns on visible parts of bodies to show a woman had powers over herself and resist to the general tone in the society - understandably, women should be conserved, gentle and “decent” as aforementioned, thus not adopting anything belonging to males. Moreover, it is easily understandable that this motive stands out for that tattooing is traditionally associated with masculinity (Thompson, 2015). Indeed, the study by Watson (1998) found that males were more likely to collect tattoos for male identification. It has also been found that males most often collected tattoos for group affiliation (probably gender affiliation) while females most often did so to express vows and arts (Watson, 1998).

The second goal discovered is to negotiate on the standards of beauty; or, in some cases, simply to adopt a standard of beauty on oneself. This goal is most often adopted by females. The second major motive depicted in McRobbie & Thornston’s (1995) work is simple and neutral in nature - it is beautiful. However, the positions of such tattoos on female bodies implied that the motive might not be as simple and neutral as it seems. They are located on concealable parts of the bodies, most often very private body parts which only sexual partners could see. Indeed, the study by Watson (1998) discovered that males were more likely to put tattoos on “public” visible
parts on bodies while females are more likely to put them on “private” parts on bodies. Does the decision to put the tattoos on such parts of bodies imply tattoos should be concealed from the general public? For they violate the societal norms and values? For they may incite outrage and condemnation? As for the mostly feminine patterns and intention for sexual partners to view them as more beautiful, they may be simply personal preferences instead of any consideration for structural constraints. Though, again, they await to be proved. A case in hand in Demello’s study could also exemplify the motive as out of consideration for structural constraints. An interviewee, Damsky collected a tattoo of Medusa, an ugly monster in the Greek mythology in order to reject the societal norm on beauty. All set on expressing own standards of beauty, some do it for a pure reason, while some uphold more resistant and rebellious motives. After all, it is clear to us that, on top of various types of people and their motives, there are also sub-fractions within a single gender with a same motive, among tattoo bearers.

Turning the focus to Hong Kong, tattooing in Hong Kong has a 72-year history, which was brought by James Ho in 1946. Inspired by the Indian practice of inking on bodies, he started the first tattoo studio, “Rose Tattoo”, in Wan Chai, mostly serving foreign sailors visiting Hong Kong (Yip and So, 2015). Hong Kong tattooing was very popular among sailors at that time, because they would like to have a permanent and special mark on their bodies so that their families would recognize them if they unfortunately lost their lives in the battlefield. Also, they chose patterns like anchors, hearts, and fierce animals like tigers as a memorable mark for their sailing lives (Chelsea, 2017). As the tattooed sailors returned to their homeland, the tattoos they borne were much appreciated by the Westerners and hence the fame of Hong Kong tattooing had spread internationally. In 1960s and 70s, the tattooing industry was expanding rapidly all over Hong Kong, and more people were getting tattoos on their bodies. In addition, tattooing had a tradition of being associated with the lower class prior to its rising popularity. Many believe its origin in Hong Kong was foreign sailors and soldiers coming to the city by sea (Priyanka_Boghani, 2013; Yip & So, 2015). Soldiers especially collect tattoos for specific reasons including to express their love for their families and identification purpose (Chan, 2016).
From the 60s through 80s, tattooing was seen as a sign of courage in some organizations in Hong Kong, notably triads. An individual gained the recognition of peers by demonstrating their tolerance to pain, dangers and the permanence of tattoos. Some triad societies even requested new members to collect a tattoo upon joining the society (“Ka Bo”, 2016; Priyanka_Boghani, 2013). Old school style was the dominating tattoo style in Hong Kong, which most often, new members were asked to collect a green dragon on the left and a white tiger on the right of their bodies (Chelsea, 2017). As a result, tattoos were most often found on triad members in that period (Ko, 2015).

Nevertheless, tattooing might not be the privilege of triads in that period. According to Jimmy Ho, a tattooist with 40 years of experience in tattooing (Chan & Yu, 2016), from the 60s through today, very few of his clients had been triad members. Instead, they are all just tattoo-lovers. Gabe, an experienced tattooist also witnessed tattooing was not confined to deviance and criminals (Chan, 2016). His clients included artists, professionals and even university professors. One of his clients, a doctor, had once told him that his tattoo had an ice-breaking effect between his patients and himself. One of the reasons for tattooing to become more popular among people in general was the celebrity effect brought about by the reality show “Miami Ink” (Ko, 2015), demonstrating that famous people could have an impact on the general public’s perceptions on deviance. In the case of Hong Kong, celebrities like Nicholas Tse and Candy Lo had given a cool and fashionable image to tattoos, which heavily influenced the younger generation at that time (Chelsea, 2017). Another reason is the increasingly diverse styles and artistic elements of tattooing, turning it into a kind of expression of arts and appealing to arts lovers. With these two contradictory images of tattooing in hand, we are appealed to explore on Hong Kong people’s perceptions on it.

In the recent decade, the meanings of tattooing in Hong Kong has been approaching to the expression of oneself. Helen Mitchell, an Australian academic researcher who investigates contemporary culture by documentary photography, shot two sets of photos about tattooed people in Hong Kong in 2007 and 2015. She identified a clear evolution of tattooing in Hong Kong in which a much greater diversity in the tattoo patterns and motivations for getting tattoos among Hong Kong people. The tattoo designs had been expanding from traditional dragons to a variety of styles. In her set of photos in 2015, *Hong Kong Ink: Tattoo Culture and Identity*, she observed
a growing trend of expressing emotions, culture, and self with tattooing in Hong Kong, especially for the sake of local identity construction (Knott, 2015). Despite the societal level, tattooing becomes more personalized and customized for story-telling of oneself. Increasing participation of customers in the process of tattooing enhances the affections that a tattoo artist put in a tattoo, deepening the meanings of it. Tattooing in Hong Kong at present is infused with various styles and elements internationally, including dotwork, realistic sketching, calligraphy, floral small tattoos etc., it is difficult to generalize a Hong Kong-style in the industry (Chelsea, 2017).

Viewing Hong Kong’s tattooing industry as a whole, it is unclear about the number of tattoo artists or studios we have due to the absence of registration and licensing requirement for tattoo artists in Hong Kong (Priyanka_boghani, 2013). The lack of legal regulations on the hygienic standards of the tattoo studios and their operation, leading to a considerable number of existence of unhygienic and unethical tattoo studios that might tattoo for people under the age of 18. The medical risks such as blood infections and physical harm associated with tattooing can be dangerous to the customers as well as the tattoo artists. As they are so hidden in the city, it poses great health and legal risks for young people in tattooing (Priyanka_boghani, 2013). Despite the negative side of the industry, we have some of the world-famous tattoo artists situated in Hong Kong, for example, Gabe Shum who tattooed for David Beckham, and Rob Kelly who ranked top 50 in the world (COMPLEX, 2015).

**Research gap and research question**

Viewing the existing literature about tattooing, we identified the gap between the Western theories on subculture and gender differences of tattooing, and the tattooing industry in Hong Kong. Therefore, our research aims to fill in the gap by putting these theories in the context of Hong Kong for analysis, in search of the unique case of Hong Kong tattooing world, as we would like to see whether the concepts developed in the Western society can be applied in the Asian societies.

In this study, our research questions include, firstly what the history of tattooing in Hong Kong is; and secondly how insiders (tattoo bearers) and outsiders view tattooing differently.
The sub-research questions, which we also intend to find out and serve as great additional supplements to the insights include the phenomenon of tattooing as a subculture and what differences between genders in the world of tattooing are.

**Methodology and Findings**

**Interviews with Insiders**

Ten insiders, four males and six females were interviewed. Among them, three were in the 60s and 70s group while the remaining were in the 80s and 90s condition. They were asked about their purposes of tattooing and the meanings of their tattoos. Also, they were asked if there was any special incident that make them get tattooed. In addition, reactions from friends and family were asked and their corresponding responses and feeling were recorded as well. Interviewees were also asked about whether tattoo has given them a new identity in society and whether they would try to hide their tattoo.

Responses are summarized as follows. There are various responses, if they can be generally categorized into the followings. First, tattooing is a beautiful and pretty artwork which can be carried forever until death due to its permanency. Hence, individuals get tattooed as a way to tell their own stories and inner feelings, and also as a memory to remind themselves something important in life. In addition, tattoo is also used to commemorate important persons in life. Due to the pain in tattooing, get inked is a form to remind oneself not to be afraid of other things in life as they have already get over the pain to be tattooed.

Some of the respondents did not think that tattooing gave them a new identity, however, some admitted that tattoo carries the meaning of a grown up and they had to face different challenges in life on their own. Moreover, some respondents revealed that tattooing is the bravest things that he had ever done, and getting tattooed gave him self autonomy.

When respondents were asked about how they were treated by friends and family with their tattoos, they said that the older relative did not really like it and they think that they became bad boys and girls once they get tattooed. In light of the rejection, some respondents had never told their parents about their tattoo and chose to put the tattoo around the body which can be easily
covered by their clothes. When parents realized their tattoos, they immediately wanted to cut them off, and it took a long time for parents to accept it as an artwork and story instead of being deviant and triads related.

Not only did respondents try to hide their tattoo in front of their parents, but also in front of others, especially strangers and seniors. Due to the stigma and negative feeling on tattoos, respondents admitted that they intentionally covered up their tattoo in job interviews and meeting important new people, such as boyfriend’s parents. It is generally because they did not want others to have a bad impression on them due to their tattoos and they did not want to explain to others in order to avoid rejection and stigma. Some of the respondents said that they showed their tattoos to new people and they asked them a lot of questions that did not show any respect. Therefore, in order to avoid all the hard feelings, they intentionally cover up their tattoo when meeting strangers and seniors.

There is no difference in the purpose of tattooing and the difficulties faced by tattooed individuals between 60s and 70s group and 80s and 90s group. Both of the group responded that they get inked for personal reasons, such as storytelling and life reminder, which is very similar to the younger generation, since only one respondent from the 80s and 90s group said that getting tattooed is just from fashion without personal stories. And in terms of the difficulties faced and feelings of others, most respondents from both groups tried to hide their tattoos from others, especially strangers so as to avoid being judged before knowing. Hence, from the interviews with insiders, it is shown that people across generations get tattooed for similar reasons and faced similar experiences.

**Interview with Outsiders**

Furthermore, twelve outsiders, seven from 80s and 90s, and five from 60s and 70s group, were interviewed. They were asked about their general understanding on tattooing and their views on their personal experience encountering a tattooed individual. Then, they were asked for the reason contributing to their particular feelings towards tattooing. They were also asked to imagine and think how would they react if their friends, colleagues or family members put on tattoos.
Lastly, they were generally asked when is tattooing acceptable and what their feeling is when they saw some of the provided photos about different styles of tattooing.

Outsiders’ responses are summarized in terms of their general feeling towards tattooing, the reasons behind their perception, and how tattooing is acceptable. First, in terms of generally feeling and perception towards tattooing, the majority of 80s, 90s group responded that tattooing is about storytelling, commemoration and expression of individuality and personality. In addition, it is cool, fashionable and pretty, given that they are not in traditional Chinese style, for example, dragon and tiger. A few respondents also mentioned that those tattooed are viewed as naughty, sexually opened and in deviant manners. While the 60s and 70s group responded more on the negative side. They thought that tattooing is exclusive to criminals, triad members, and prisoners. And they thought that people getting tattooed because they would like to stand out in the crowd and be different. However, there are one to two respondents who thought that tattooing is neutral and they are more about artwork now.

There are also differences on the reasons behind such perception between the two groups. In the 80s and 90s group, they have more positive views on tattoos because of the celebrity effect and tattooed friends, that they understood that not only bad people can get inked, but also ordinary persons and famous people. However, they responded that their negative perception towards tattooing is contributed by the negative portrayal of triads in old movies and media, and their family education. In the 60s and 70s group, their negative perception is mainly contributed by the environment that they grown up in and what they encounter when they were still teenagers. By the time they were still young, they only saw triad-like members with tattoos wandering on the street and they did not notice any change until now. Therefore, they still hold negative feelings towards tattooing.

Moreover, there are also different views towards the acceptableness and motivation of tattooing. In the 80s and 90s group, they responded that tattooing is cool when it is with a meaning and symbolize commitment and important things in life. Some of the respondents also mentioned that since tattooing is expensive so it must be meaningful to the tattooed individual. On the other hand, in the 60s and 70s group, they think tattooing is acceptable when it is for performance, beauty
and fashion and to cover scars on body. Moreover, a few of them said when it is not with dragon and tiger pattern and not too big, it is acceptable. Yet, some of the respondents said it is not acceptable in any circumstance.

**Interviews with Tattoo Artists**

In order to understand the development of the tattoo industry more precisely, five interviews with six tattoo artists were conducted from October to December 2017.

Before conducting the first interview, criteria were set so as to identify the appropriate artists for interview. The original criteria for finding the artists include that tattoo artist should have at least ten years of tattooing experiences, and local artists are preferred. It is hoped that the artists with such criteria can provide us the information of the development of the industry in a very local context.

However, since most experienced tattoo artists are busy and fully booked, the year of experience criterion was lowered, and different tattoo artists working in Hong Kong were invited for interviews. After all, one of the six interviewed tattooed artists have more than ten years of experience, who provided us with insightful information, such as the views and information of tattooing passing to their apprentice by the masters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Rich Phipson</th>
<th>Ross Turpin</th>
<th>Rob Kelly</th>
<th>Tina Choi</th>
<th>Eric</th>
<th>Locka</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of experience</strong></td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>3 month</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Half year apprenticeship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tattoo studio</strong></td>
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<td>Star Crossed Tattoo</td>
<td>Blackout Tattoo</td>
<td>Hello Tattoo</td>
<td>Freedom Tattoo</td>
<td>Ink Mark Tattoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artists’ origin</strong></td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Interviewed tattoo artists’ basic information.

Each interview was conducted by at least two group members and the format of the interview was like group-chatting started with the pre-set questions and ended with some open-ended questions. Each interview usually took 40 minutes and the content of the interviews was voice recorded. The interviews were divided into three parts, which were the background of the artists, insights about tattooing in Hong Kong and customers range of the artists. There was a set of questions deliberated but some of the questions were amended according to the background of and responses of the artists.

The interview results are analyzed separately in three parts, namely local artists, foreign artists and the customers range.

**Local artists.** The interview with local artists focused on their apprenticeship and the current environment of tattooing industry. Three local artists mentioned that they started their tattooing career with a foundation of drawing and they finished their apprenticeship within a few years. In fact, the threshold for the outsiders to newly join the industry is relatively lower than in the past. Taking artist Locka as an example, she was a fresh graduate this year and applied the apprenticeship through contacting the social media of the tattoo parlour. Despite the existence of some basic requirements, like the drawing skills and creativity, there are more tattooists willing to hire and recruit the apprentice and it is easy in assessing information of the tattoo parlours online, people can be a tattoo artist easily. This is mainly due to the thriving tattooing industry nowadays.

However, the lowered threshold for newcomers to participate in the industry also raises some concern of the subculture group which is seen as one of the source contributing to the current stigma of the tattoo industry. Though tattoo artists interviewed are passionate about tattooing and have made a lot of effort in upholding their professionalism, there are black sheep ruining the reputation of the industry in Hong Kong, as revealed by some tattoo artists.

In fact, the unprofessional tattooists were also mentioned by the foreign artists but the local artists talked more about that because of their local background and familiarity with the ecology
of the industry. In general, tattooists who lack professional ethics and skills are those who harm the industry. The emergence of unprofessional tattooists is mainly due to the high monetary incentive and insufficient knowledge.

The income of a famous tattooist is considerable. As the results, the motive of some tattooists is not related to their interests but the monetary incentive. This is not wrong at all as everyone has their own choices and reasons. Yet, some immoral tattooists, in order to earn more money, recruit as many apprentices as they can and let the unqualified apprentice start their own business without assessing their ability. The local artists said that actually, you can claim yourself as a “tattoo artists” whenever you think you complete the apprentice. The apprenticeship period last for just a few months to few years, depending on the talent and the sense of responsibility of the apprentice. At the same time, the operation of the equipment of tattooing is not so difficult that anyone who is taught for few day can operate them easily, yet the quality is another thing. Teaching a “tattooist” is not as hard as the other professions but teaching a professional tattoo artist need to pay far more efforts. The low-quality teaching and the over-recruitment of apprentice cause the emergence of the unskillful tattooists in the industry.

There is no official standard to qualify a tattoo artist. And, the profession of the tattooists, according to all tattoo artists, can be divided into two categories, hygiene and drawing. In details, the hygienic condition of the tattoo equipment should be maintained a high standard that they should be sterilized before use. The drawing is about the ability of the tattooists to draw the images lively on the human body and last long enough.

Considering the unprofessional tattooists in the city, the hygienic condition of the tattoo studios is not satisfactory that the equipment is not sterilized every time and the syringes are re-used. This practice put the clients in danger as the clients might easily infect different blood infectious diseases, like AIDS. However, more unprofessional tattooists are related to the poor drawing skills. The artists shared their story about encountering those tattooists. For example, one of the artists tattooed the first time but the tattoo lost color just within a few months. The artist then needed to pay more money to repair the tattoo in another tattoo studio. As the tattoo artist mentioned that the consequence of the unskillful tattooing would only be shown after a few months
later, the clients usually would not get back to that tattooist to argue. Still, the reputation of the industry is ruined.

When tattoo artists were being asked on their opinions on setting up a licensing system to regulate the industry and eliminate the unprofessional tattoo artists, the local and foreign artists share distinct views regarding this issue. The foreign artists are supportive of the licensing system because it can effectively monitor the industry while the local artists have more concerns about it. The first concern is the fear of affecting the newcomers to be the apprentice and thus affect the development of the growing industry. The second concern is that they are worried about the standard of the license system because art is subjective. The local artists thought that the current situation is satisfactory as long as they do their best to uphold the professional ethics and show the qualities of a professional tattoo artist to their clients. Their business will not be affected by the bad artists too much. The response of the local artists shows that tattooing in Hong Kong is a very individualistic business that every tattoo studio is independent from the whole tattooing community. The subculture community is formed with clients instead of their business competitors.

**Foreign artists.** Regarding the career of the foreign tattoo artists, the meaning of tattooing is not related to any criminality but the self-pursuit of arts which see tattooing as their life-long career. Coincidentally, the three foreign tattooists mentioned the individualistic factor in being a tattoo artist. They can set their own schedule with their clients as well as decide their opening time of their tattoo studios. Unlike the conventional office hour in Hong Kong, the tattoo studios are usually opened in the afternoon and closed at night, which is flexible to tattoo artists.

People might be fascinated by the autonomy of the artists in deciding their own working style. Yet, being a professional tattooist needs relentless hard work, which they all emphasized in the interviews. As Ross mentioned:

“Tattoo creation focus on individual ability and effort.”
“There is a pressure to perform better as there is no peak in tattoo creation.”
“There is a constant struggle to keep up the standard.”
There is no difference between being a painter and a tattoo artist which means that you have to practice drawing every day in order to design the best tattoo patterns. The daily routine of the artists, other than serving their clients, is drawing. Tattoo artists have to practice daily in order to maintain their competitiveness. In this sense, although there is no professional examination to assess the ability of tattooists like the other professions in Hong Kong, most tattoo artists are disciplined in providing good work.

Talking about the development of tattooing in Hong Kong, it represents the commodification of tattoo in Hong Kong which fit Hebdige’s theory which is the process of the acceptance of subculture in a society (Erin, 2010). One form of this process, as mentioned above, is that the subcultural signs are converted into mass-produced objects. The artists revealed that tattooing has changed a lot over the decade. The number of people who are going to have tattoo is increasing and tattoo shops are more readily available in Hong Kong as well. In the past, there were very few options for people to get tattooed, for example, there were only a few tattoo shops in Hong Kong which located in Wan Chai, but things have changed in the recent decade. There was a rapid growth of tattooing industry and more people were willing to be tattoo artists, which shows the growing popularity of tattoo in Hong Kong. As more tattoo artists are available for the public, the uniqueness of the tattoo subculture is diluting as the tattooing is more popular and accepted by the mainstream.

There are many factors that contribute to the acceptance of tattoo in Hong Kong society. According to the observation of the artists, the effect of the media is of great significance in shaping the view of tattoo of the general public. Rich mentioned that

“When I first started the career in Hong Kong, many customers came for the TV show “Miami Ink”. The show changed a lot - a lot more people have tattoos since then, including sports stars.”
Miami Ink was an American reality show filming at a tattoo studio in Miami Beach. The show focused on every story behind the clients of the shop and the life of the tattooists which provided the public with a chance to understand more about the subculture group directly.

Also, the celebrity effect is also as significant as the media effect. For example, the famous NBA basketball player Lebron James and the English professional football player David Beckham have eye-catching tattoos on their body. Yet, as what Rob stated, “nobody cares about their tattoo which will affect their professions.” It indeed represents the mentality of the people nowadays that is the normalization of tattooing. With the power effect of the media and the celebrities, having tattoo is gradually becoming a normal routine for beauty and fashion, and an expression of self. There is an increasing number of professionals having tattoos this few year, according to Rob.

Commenting on the stigma of tattoo in Hong Kong, there were different opinions on this issue among the three foreign artists. Rich and Ross expressed that there is no need to de-stigmatize tattoo because people have to understand the consequences completely before they get inked. Also, some of the people get tattooed solely due to the stigma of tattooing so they get eye-catching, scary and death-related tattoos. This point of view inspired us indeed as we, as the outsiders, have not thought about the subculture identity of the group before. Actually, the stigma came from the tattoos which is actually the sign of the subculture group makes the group different from the mainstream. Some of the tattoo barriers, in order to persist their unique subculture identity, would have a large piece of tattoos covering their arms, chest or back, which is in accord with the finding of Erin (2010) that the tattoo subculture group would use the placement and the images of their tattoos to determine the authentic subculture identity. In this sense, there is no need to de-stigmatize tattooing because the stigma brought by tattoos is the product of what tattoo bearers pursue.

Yet, Rob shared a different perspective on this issue which is also our aim of this project. Rob said that the stigma of tattoo still exists and he shared his story at the beginning of his tattoo career. The sign of the tattoo studio of Rob is just stated as “Blackout” instead of “Blackout Tattoo”. When we asked the reason behind, Rob said that it would be hard to rent the studio if he states the true purpose of renting. The owners or agents will just reject him with excuses. There
was an obstacle for Rob to overcome when he was going to open his first tattoo studio due to the prejudice of the agents and space owners which was brought by the stigma of tattooing.

**The customers range.** Tattoo artists responded that most of the clients are about 20 to 40 years old and there is no clear gender difference of the clients which means that both male and female are willing to have tattoos. Tattoo artists also mentioned that their clients come from all walks of life, lawyers, teachers and nurses, etc. As a results, getting tattooed is prevalent across gender and occupation. Yet, there is still stigma in the society. When we asked about the placement of the tattoo of the clients who are professions, the artists said that they would usually get tattoo on their waist or shoulder so that they can cover the tattoo when they work. It shows that the professionals are still afraid of being labelled by their boss or their family members which may thus negatively affect their career.

Another point the artists raised was the meaning of tattoo to the clients has changed a lot. Artists revealed that every client has their own reason to get inked, for example, to commemorate their beloved family members or events that are special to the clients. Instead of the old belief that tattoo is related to criminals or triad members, the meaning of tattoo is being redefined, according to the artists. The redefinition of tattoo shows that tattoo is being accepted by the mainstream and it gradually becomes a trend. Some artists also mentioned that some of their clients want to get tattooed because “a tattoo looks good.” In this sense, tattoo becomes an accessory, like earrings and necklaces, for the beauty of both men and women. The growing popularity of tattooing is also possibly contributed by the change in understanding tattoos.

**Field observation**

**Tattoo Convention.** The 5th Hong Kong China International Tattoo Convention 2017 was held from September 29th to October 1st, 2017 at the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal. Over 300 tattoo artists from all around the world gathered there to display their work, interact with Hong Kong people and different artists, as well as seek commercial opportunities in Hong Kong. It involved artists from Hong Kong, Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, USA, and Taiwan, co-creating an internationally vibrant tattoo convention. The entrance ticket costs $180 per person, which is quite expensive for large-scale international conventions. This price might not be
appealing to the general public, but certainly a worthy price for tattoo lovers to meet the best tattoo artists in the world.

Hundreds of booths were set up without dividing zones according to the nationalities of the artists. Therefore, lots of different styles of tattoos can be observed in one glance. They displayed their studio names and significant designs on big banners, as well as a catalogue of their designs that were available for tattooing service. Another eye-catching way to display their tattoo work was using their bodies. Japanese artists had their entire back covered in tattoos, and they were showing them to the audiences by wearing only a thin underwear. The displayers were mostly men, with only a few women displaying in this way. In-booth tattooing was available in the convention but they were too popular that walk-in was not possible. Both the customers and artists were open to photography during the process of tattooing, without feeling embarrassed. Also, frequent interactions can be seen between artists, and also artists and audiences. The tattoo artists were very friendly and welcoming for questions regardless of purchasing their service or not. We were able to chat with a number of tattoo artists from different countries.

Observed from the audiences, most of them had tattoos themselves. They mostly wear in black and looking very stylish in hairstyle and clothing. Some of them got tattoos at their backs or neck, places that they can normally hide with clothing, but they deliberately wore vests or tied up their hair to show their tattoos, which we found it as a sign of them entering another social world. Also, there were some outsiders like us who even brought their kids to the convention for a visit. They seemed to be excited and respectful of the different styles of tattoos, though some might seem exotic to them. One thing to keep in mind during the observation was that the relatively higher ticket price might act as a filter, so that only the people who accept and are interested in the tattooing industry would enter the convention. So, the positive responses observed from the convention might not be an accurate portrayal of the perception on tattooing of the general public.

The commercial setting of the tattoo convention was reflected in how the booths operate, and the selling of side products about tattooing in the venue. The major activities operated in the booths are in-booth tattooing services and pre-booking for the tattooing service after the exhibition. It also told us about the nature of the tattooing business is a user-generated sale of service, in a
way that the interested customers would take the initiative to approach tattoo artists, instead of tattoo artists reaching out for customers. As for other tattooing commodities, these booths were trying to sell products as a complementary to their tattoos. Products like tattoo ink, tattoo care creams, tattoo magazines, t-shirts and socks with David Beckham’s tattoo printed on them etc. They were not only targeting at audiences but also the tattoo artists holding the exhibition.

One inspiration on our project was our quick chats with some of the local tattoo artists. We searched for some local booths with impressive tattoo designs and tried to talk to them, and surprisingly found that all of them had experiences below three years. Jonathan Tsang, a young Hong Kong tattoo artist affiliated with ZINK TATTOO, displayed some creative designs and he started as a tattoo artists just two years ago. This changed our perception on the relationship between years of experience and quality of a tattoo artist, hence we changed our criteria for selecting tattoo artists for interviews from 10 years to whichever years of experiences they are at. From our observation, we believe that young artists can also provide a nice overview of the tattooing industry for us, as well as providing a fresher perspective into the industry.

Last observation was on the variety of tattooing styles we saw in the convention. The features and styles were not limited by the geographical region the artists came from, but they still in a sense reflect some general characteristics for their culture. For example, Japanese style tattoos were very distinctive, with a great degree of reference to the traditional pictures and culture. Chinese does a lot of characters in Chinese myths, gods and goddesses, as well as traditional art patterns. While looking at the booths of Hong Kong artists, they were certainly blooming with highly diversified tattoo style, but it was difficult for us to tell whether it is made by Hong Kong artists from just viewing their work. It is a bit difficult to generalize a descriptive word for Hong Kong style tattoo.

**Tattoo Studios.** Throughout the visits to tattoo studios along our interviews with tattoo artists, the following features of the few studios have been observed, with some present in all tattoo studios. They are worth noting not just by the frequencies they appear, but also the latent meanings behind which could help us have more and deeper understandings of the industry.
Firstly, for all of the studios, tidiness and orderliness are highly perceivable. Not a single mess or an impression of “this object should not be at here” (e.g. magazine on sofa, ink bottle not on shelves, etc.) were witnessed. We were impressed by the detailed care to the studios and commitment to the career of the tattoo artists.

Secondly, hygienic standards were adhered to in the studios, which also prove the artists’ commitment to the professional codes and interests of customers. According to 2 of the artist interviewees, hygiene is of utmost importance in this industry as tattooing involves piercings of skin and thus leakages of blood and other body tissues / fluids. Therefore, the right procedure is to cover equipments tightly and thoroughly so as to prevent transmissions and spread of diseases. In most of the tattoo studios, we could see equipments already covered in plastic and rolls of cling wrap, signalling the preparation to stick strictly to this necessary procedure.

Thirdly, bombing artworks in various forms including sculptures, models, paintings, posters, maps are hardly neglectable in all of the studios. This is out of our expectations. Moreover, the amount of books in the studios are also perceivable. In 3 of the studios - Star Crossed Tattoo, BLACKOUT and Freedom Tattoo, there are even bookshelves for holding the large collections of books. All these effectively convey the artists’ great love and adherence to arts and aesthetics. It is also notable that for two of the self-owned studios - Star-Crossed Tattoo and BLACKOUT and Ink Mark, there are considerably more displays of works by the artists themselves.

Fourthly, division of labour has been observed throughout the visits. Apart from the artists, there are also managers, receptionists and other staff at the studios. It is worth noting that some of these staff perform the functions of hospitality. For example, when we arrived at one of the studios, a staff (judging by that she sat by the door all the time and came to greet us once we set foot on the studio, she might be the receptionist) immediately asked if we needed any drinks and they had a variety of drinks for us to choose from. It somehow shows an important side of the industry - despite a form of arts, it is still a business. They have to ensure everything runs smoothly, the customers are received or served well and the transactions are carried out without any hitch. Seemingly, the artists mostly, if not only, focus on the works on tattooing and leave other duties to co-workers.
Lastly, we must note that most studios blocked the view to the tattooing area. However, Ink Mark Tattoo did not do the same. When inquired upon this difference by the interviewers, they explained they wanted to tell the customers that they were not hiding anything from anyone.

**Social experiment in Capstone Fair**

A social experiment was designed to conduct among our audiences at the Capstone Fair as part of our data collection. We invited the visitors of our booth to put on a temporary tattoo on their visible body parts, for example, arms, neck, and the back of hands. They were asked to show it and observe the responses they get from others. A Facebook page “Tattooing in Hong Kong - HKU Capstone Fair” was opened for collecting these responses. We highly encouraged the participants to post up the occasion which they got the responses, a short description of what the responses were, and their personal thoughts about tattooing. There were 67 participants in the social experiment and 16 responses were collected.

Our booth for presenting the project was divided into three sections: Presentation, Temporary tattoo-making, and Message Board. We first engaged our audiences in a short introduction of our project and the major objectives and findings, then we explained the aim of the social experiment that we were doing and invited them to join. After they had liked our Facebook page, they can choose free temporary tattoo stickers and immediately put it on. Finally, we encouraged audiences to write us their thoughts on tattooing, our project, or their words to the tattoo bearers.

Putting our focus on how the audiences reacted to our study and the presentation of it, they are generally very supportive and open-minded. A lot of them are attracted by our promotion on Facebook about the free tattoo stickers, and they are very excited about the outcome from putting on the sticker. The findings are categorized in three demographic features of the audiences: Cultural background, Age, and Gender.

We had audiences of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, which enriched the diversity of responses from different cultures. Hong Kong locals, Mainland Chinese, Koreans,
Indians, Pakistanis, Canadians, Americans and so on are the types of audiences we got in the Capstone Fair. Most of the Asians expressed discontents from parents and relatives when they wanted to get tattoos, while Indians pointed out their religious taboo for girls to get permanent tattoos as their bodies would be perceived as impure and dirty with tattoos. Also, among the tattoo stickers we bought, there was an elephant that is the god of her religion. To her, it is inappropriate to tattoo their gods on their bodies, but she understood that there are outsiders of their culture who would tattoo it simply because it looks nice. For Westerners, they were curious about the meanings of tattoos in Hong Kong and not shocked by the stigma it has in our society, They also reflected a similarity in the trend of the change in meanings of tattoos, but a different social perception when compared with their cultures.

In terms of age, it is very obvious that the elder audiences (beyond 40 years old) were more conservative and careful on the topic of tattoo. They expressed concern over the permanency of tattoos, even as a decorative purpose, that our bodies are not the same as canvas which you can paint and remove it anytime. Most of them rejected the idea of normalization of tattooing because of the possible labels attached on them especially in the workplace and among relatives. Also because of this reason, they refuse to participate in the social experiment. Turning to the younger audiences that are students at our age, they presented drastically different responses to our study on tattooing in Hong Kong. They generally appreciated an academic study on tattooing which they thought was uncommon but needed to be addressed. During our presentation, they shared a lot of personal experiences with their tattooed friends and their impressions on tattooing. Almost every of them were willing to participate in the social experiment, and not afraid to put the sticker on a highly visible body part to challenge their parents. Some even said this experiment made them want to get a real tattoo.

Considering the distribution of gender among our audiences, our topic attracted to both genders evenly. There were some interesting differences between the two genders in the choice and positions of tattoo stickers. Male audiences laughed at the floral and cute patterns, and they tend to go for big calligraphy tattoos, and small symbols like stars and cross. They were very open to having large tattoos on their bodies. Female audiences went the opposite direction and chose the floral and animals patterns, which were more colourful and soft-looking. They tend to choose
more than one stickers, and were scared by the big gothic style tattoos and said those would look “too crazy” on them. In terms of the position of sticking the tattoo, males go for arms and behind the neck, while females go for forearm, wrists, fingers, and behind the ear. Still, there were a few audiences who wished to challenge the norms by choosing very gender role-conflicting stickers for themselves.

Weeks after the Capstone Fair, we had been receiving responses from the social experiment. Summarizing their experiences with the temporary tattoo, they involved the reactions from outsiders’ and self-reflections about tattooing. Firstly, outsiders like family and relatives criticized their act of tattooing, even after they knew it was a fake one. They insisted on the idea that only bad people and gangsters would put on tattoos, and tattoos would make girls look “cheap”. But they received supports from friends, though they were shocked but felt excited for the experiment. In general, people judged without understanding why they got those tattoos on, which reflecting on the reality of tattooed people, they have been bearing this unfair judgment the whole time. As for self-reflection, they felt more self-conscious with a tattoo on. It was a great opportunity for them to get into others’ shows to feel what the stigmatized insiders feel when their intentions of getting tattoos are misunderstood by the outsiders. Also, they became more aware of their own prejudice against tattooed people and the act of tattooing.

Overall, the social experiment has successfully stimulated discussions about tattooing between the older and younger generations, which seemed scary to most people at our age, but it was an interesting interaction among the two generations. It was a successful communication between the worlds of the insiders and outsiders, letting some outsiders to realize that tattooing is actually not as a big issue as they thought, and respect should be upheld between the two sides.

**Discussion**

**Insiders and Outsiders’ views on tattooing**

Meanings and purposes of tattooing have been changing throughout its 72-year history in tattooing industry in Hong Kong, from criminal and triad-related to fashion and storytelling in recent decades; the perception of the general public has only changed slightly, yet largely remained deviant and negative. In light of the general negative perception on tattooing by the public, tattooed
individual not only faces difficulties in life, such as job interviews and first impression, but also get strange and stigmatized experience when meeting new people with their tattooed shown. Hence, most tattooed individuals choose to cover up their tattoos or put them in body part that tattoos can be easily covered normally, so as to avoid being judged by their tattoos or getting misunderstood or questioned by others. In addition, most, if not all, outsiders tend to guess and hold a negative perception towards those tattooed and remain unwilling to open-mindedly ask before making their judgment. It can be seen from interviews with outsiders that not until they have friends with tattoos, they did not understand the truth behind the tattoos, and they kept holding negative views towards those tattooed. As a result, it is found that there is very limited communication between insiders and outsiders regarding the meanings and purposes of tattooing, which therefore causes the stereotype and stigma on tattooing remains in modern society.

**Overview of Hong Kong Tattooing Industry**

Not only do tattooed individuals encounter difficulties in society, but also tattoo artists, who face difficulties when renting a place for work. Generally, tattooing is hidden in the city, where you could hardly recognize a tattoo shop by simply walking in the city. However, they are prominent and easily accessible in social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, where tattoo artists promote themselves. Though tattooing is not publicly recognized in Hong Kong, there is a growing number of young people who would like to get tattooed to record important things in their lives. With the increase in demand and acceptableness in the younger generation, there is a rapidly growth in tattooing industry. Given the ease to enter the industry, there is a highly competitive environment for tattoo artists in Hong Kong. Yet, with conservative attitude of government and the general public, insufficient legalization and regulation in tattooing industry put customers and tattoo artists at risk of unsafe tattooing processes. Nonetheless, many renowned tattoo studios uphold their professionalism in providing safe and professional services for customers in Hong Kong.

**Gender in the Tattooing World**

From the interviews with tattoo artists and the social experiment at capstone fair, equal popularities of tattooing of both genders was identified. The tattoo artists interviewed indicated similar proportions of male and female customers; while the social experiment appealed to as
much males as females. It shows the gender difference in tattooing is narrowing down, in terms of getting tattooed and involving in the industry.

Nonetheless, the size, patterns and positions of tattoos tell us certain divergences between the 2 genders. Preferences on certain styles by different genders can be clearly observed. According to the artists, as well as our observations at the fair, the majority of males opted for larger sizes of tattoos, like ones which cover the whole outer upper arms, though there were still a number of males who picked small patterns as small stars and crosses. It exemplifies that males wanted their tattoos to be more visible. It is line with Watson’s (1998) research that males were more likely to collect tattoos for the purpose of male identification, as tattooing was traditionally associated with masculinity (Thompson, 2015). As for the reactions to floral and cute tattoo patterns, the receptions were universal.

On the other hand, females overwhelmingly opted for smaller sizes of tattoos. When participants were choosing tattoo stickers, some of them even expressed that big tattoos do not fit their image and style as a female. Females’ decisions to put the tattoos on bodies might reflect the instilled perceptions of females shouldn’t have tattoos based on femininity - they violate the societal values of females being conserved, gentle and “decent” daughters, wives and mothers; and that they might lead to condemnation. Albeit the overwhelmingly collective decisions on small sizes of tattoos and the propositions from literature, whether this is really the case or not still has to depend on further quantitative research for statistical significance.

In terms of the patterns, males tended to pick calligraphy patterns and debunked the cute, floral patterns, finding the patterns absurd on their bodies; whereas females tended to pick patterns of flowers and animals, which looked more colorful and soft. This divergence may be out of gender-specific preferences or constraints of societal norms. Besides, it somehow shows males had been instilled of the understanding of tattooing associated with masculinity, and thus rejected to feminine patterns. Despite a few audiences who set on to challenge the norms by choosing gender role-conflicting stickers for themselves, the aforementioned divergences are leading patterns at the fair. Again, these outstanding cases may be for personal preferences or the quest for control from societal constraints.
In addition, gender differences can also be shown from reactions received by our social experiment participant, one female student who received the comment that a tattoo makes a girl look cheap from her family. This comment somehow reflects a gender stereotype on how people think females should not get tattooed. Regrettably, it is insufficient for statistical generalizability as in Hill’s (2016) and Swami & Furnham’s (2007) studies.

Should tattooing be de-stigmatized?

Destigmatization of tattooing is necessary, but it does not mean to remove all the negative meanings about tattoo and force people to only accept the positive parts of it. Tattoo, in its nature, has good and bad meanings. It can diversely contain deviance, love, memory, and encouragement. Referring to our interviewees, Rich and Ross, of their views on the stigma of tattoos, it is no deny that some people get tattoos because they want to act deviant, they want that label on them. This is disrespectful to them to erase that deviant meaning “for their good”. It is unnecessary and meaningless to remove the bad meanings because these bad meanings could mean something to some people. Also, this kind of destigmatization would not be recognized by others because this changes the nature of tattooing into an untruthful presentation of it.

Our destigmatization focuses on respecting the diversity of the meanings of tattoos, promoting the mutual understanding between insiders and outsiders, so as to reduce the unfair stigma attached on some of the insiders. Efforts by various parties in Hong Kong have been working towards this type of destigmatization so that the communication between the insiders and outsiders can be intensified. For instance, there are more new media reporting about the stories behind tattoos and tattoo artists, persuading people that tattoos have way deeper meanings than deviance and criminality. Also, the increasing exposure of tattoos on both local and non-local celebrities is normalizing tattooing into a kind of fashion, art, or accessory among the young people. The higher exposure of tattooed bodies could tell the public that they do not have to be the minority in the society, it can actually be as normal as wearing a necklace or a ring that carries meanings. A step up to the industry level, Freedom Tattoo which has been organizing Tattoo Convention for five years as an international art market event, and introducing tattoo art to the
public as well as to show the diversity of tattooing can strive to eliminate the misconception that
tattoo is only about scary pictures and the dark side.

**Limitation**

Though our research has provided some insights on the tattooing industry in Hong Kong, there are several limitations. First, there is an imbalance number of interviewees between 60s and 70s group and 80s and 90s group. Due to limited human resources, there are fewer number of interviewees in 60s and 70s can be accessed with tattoos. Therefore, the data may not be able to reveal the entire picture of tattooed individuals born in the 60s and 70s. Therefore, it is possible that people from the 60s and 70s may get tattooed for other reasons besides storytelling and reminder. In addition, there is a lack of interviewees, both insiders and outsiders and tattoo artists with different backgrounds, which may not be able to draw a comprehensive conclusion in different aspects. Most interviewees are friends or someone we personally know, hence, it is likely that most interviewees are from similar background, such as university students and professionals with bachelor degree. Thus, there is a lack of diverse information from different social groups, such as the lower class. Therefore, future research should include more interviews in different backgrounds and generations, so as to collect diverse opinions on tattooing.

Secondly, we have to acknowledge that we could not make the distinction between the difference in age and that in cohort for this study. Both factors could have influences on the different opinions by the two generations. The means to disentangle the two is to conduct a longitudinal life-course study spanning over decades. Given the time constraint of only 3 months for this study, we could not conduct such a research and thus are to a certain extent shy of distinguishing age difference from cohort difference.

**Suggestions**

In view of the current trend of tattooing in Hong Kong, four suggestions are provided aiming at enhancing the mutual communications of the subculture group and the dominant group
and preventing the reputation of the tattoo industry from being harmed by the unprofessional artists.

**Increasing public participation in tattooing**

The industry can organize more tattooing-related conventions in Hong Kong, just like the Hong Kong Tattoo Convention 2017 in October, with a lower entrance fee to attract the general public. The convention can be not just a sacred place for the tattoo lovers, but also act as a medium to educate the artistry of tattoo to the public. As the results, the general public would be able to know more about the diversity and artistic qualities of tattooing and the misconceptions of tattoo will then be eliminated.

**Institutional regulations on tattoo artists**

Tattooing is not regulated by law in Hong Kong now which means that everyone can claim themselves tattoo artists. Although there is usually apprenticeship in tattooing industry, it is no guarantee that tattoo artists are always good and professional. There are interviewees revealing their bad tattooing experiences in the past, and given that tattooing involves physical contact and the possibility of blood-related diseases transmission, it is suggested to provide licensing for tattoo artists and studios in order to ensure the hygiene and standard of tattoo artists. Through institutional regulation, only those uphold professionalism and proper sanitation will be given an issue code of practice for an ethical tattooing business in the territory. Licensing aims to protect customers and tattoo artists from diseases during the process of tattooing and ensure safe operation. In addition, it aims to assure the professional standard of tattooing in Hong Kong in order to increase confidence in getting tattooed in here. Moreover, it is to provide tattooing with a legal and professional status, so as provide a better image of tattooing which is no longer a secret and underground business limited to triad members in Hong Kong.

**Discussion on social media**

Tattooed individuals can be invited to tell their tattoo stories on social media and even create a hashtag movement like the one of #metoo. With a huge amount of the diverse stories behind tattooing, it could not only raise concerns over the stigmatization of tattooing, but also stimulate discussions on the stigma of tattooing with more inputs of such stories and a platform
for insiders and outsiders to interact. This platform on popular social media sites allows feedbacks to and forth both parties, thus hopefully makes outsiders understand the hidden meanings of tattoos and insiders to get glimpses of how outsiders view them with their tattoos. After all, it is hoped that this proposed movement could help spread the idea that the meaning of tattoo varies among different people that it is not necessarily negative anymore.

**Governmental promotion on safety precautions for tattooing**

Newcomers, especially young people, into the tattooing world are prone to various risks like medical risks from the process of tattooing, or being scammed by unethical tattoo artists. These risks exist because they are uninformed on the precautions and necessary research to do before getting a tattoo. Some teenagers probably do not know that tattooing at the age of under 18 is illegal in Hong Kong. In order to protect youngsters from illegal and unsafe tattooing, as well as to ensure that they know the possible consequences of tattooing, the government has to address the growing trend of tattooing in Hong Kong by educate the youngsters of the important safety notes about tattooing. Reminders about the impacts of tattooing such as its permanence, pain, and chances of infection are necessary for the sake of the public.

However, it is noticed that there are concerns over the implications for the government to issue these safety precautions. The suggestions for the government would communicate the stance of the government towards tattooing to the public as, in some sense, supporting tattooing. This might trigger the discontent amongst the conservative population who still upholds the negative view on tattooing. At the same time, the subculture group might be reluctant to too much intervention of the government as they want to maintain their autonomy of their business. While the government has to recognize the urge in addressing the safety issues on tattooing, it has to carefully consider different stakeholders in Hong Kong.

**Conclusion**

Despite the lack of existing academic literature on tattooing in Hong Kong, this research is done with reference to Western theories, together with a series of interviews with tattoo bearers, tattoo artists, and outsiders of the tattooing world. Although the meanings of tattooing has been
changing over the past decades, it is disappointing to see that people's perception towards tattooing remained to be deviant, which only matched with the past image of tattoo. It is true that some subculture groups would use tattooing to reinforce their masculinity and deviant status, but they do not represent every insider.

Meanings of tattoo transformed from deviance to art work, and to identity construction to oneself. However, as responded by our participants in the social experiment, local families and the older generation are still very conservative about tattooing as artwork. Some extreme stigma are still existing in society and tattoo bearers are suffering from unfair judgment in different social settings.

To make a change in the society, respect of diversity as well as individual choices are important in destigmatizing tattooing. Not in the way of eliminating the bad meanings and force people to agree with the act, but to respect and listen to them before you judge.
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