International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Operating Publisher
SciFormat Publishing Inc.
ISNI: 0000 0005 1449 8214

2734 17 Avenue SW,
Calgary, Alberta, T3E0A7,
Canada
+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

ARTICLE TITLE	TATTOOED BODIES, URBAN SPACES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF TATTOO PRACTICES IN ORAN (ALGERIA) AND COLOGNE (GERMANY)
DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.2(50).2026.6039
RECEIVED	24 April 2025
ACCEPTED	30 December 2025
PUBLISHED	31 May 2026
LICENSE	The article is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.**

TATTOOED BODIES, URBAN SPACES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF TATTOO PRACTICES IN ORAN (ALGERIA) AND COLOGNE (GERMANY)

Ahlem Habib Grine
PhD Candidate, University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria

Mehdi Souiah
Professor, University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria

ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the social representations and symbolic meanings of tattooing in two distinct urban environments: Oran, Algeria, and Cologne, Germany. Our research combines longterm fieldwork conducted in Oran (20242025) for a Master's dissertation in urban anthropology, with an exploratory comparative fieldwork carried out in Cologne in December 2025 within the framework of the DiaMiGo Project at the University of Cologne, under the supervision of Professor Martin Zillinger. Mobilising the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, Louis Wirth's conception of urbanism as a way of life, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, we analyse how tattooing (as a corporeal practice) articulates identity, belonging, resistance, and stigma across two radically different urban contexts. While in Oran tattooing operates at the tense boundary between centre and margin, simultaneously signalling personal freedom and social transgression, in Cologne it functions as a normalised artistic practice embedded in the urban fabric. The comparison reveals how the city itself, its anonymity, density, and symbolic power, shapes the meanings that bodies inscribe on themselves.

KEYWORDS

Tattooing, Urban Anthropology, Social Representations, Symbolic Interactionism, Oran, Cologne, Identity, Stigma, Urban Anonymity, Centre/Margin

CITATION

Ahlem Habib Grine, Mehdi Souiah. (2026) Tattooed Bodies, Urban Spaces: An Ethnographic Exploration of Tattoo Practices in Oran (Algeria) and Cologne (Germany). *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 2(50). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.2(50).2026.6039

1. Introduction:

The city has long served as both canvas and laboratory for social transformation. In Oran, Algeria, as in Cologne, Germany, the body is not merely a biological fact but a visible surface on which individuals inscribe their social position, their aspirations, and their negotiations with collective norms. Among the many practices through which young urban dwellers write upon their bodies, tattooing stands out for its irreversibility, its visibility, and the intensity of social reactions it provokes.

This article traces a comparative ethnographic journey across two cities. We first conducted fieldwork on contemporary tattooing in Oran for our Master's dissertation in urban anthropology (2025), and later carried out an exploratory study in Cologne in December 2025, during a research stay funded by the DiaMiGo Project (Dialogue on Migration Governance in the EuroMediterranean Region) at the University of Cologne. The purpose of the Cologne exploration was precisely to sharpen the comparative lens: to observe a city in which tattooing has completed a trajectory toward full social normalisation, and to understand what this contrast reveals about the specific conditions of our Oran fieldwork.

Our research is animated by a central question: how does urban space shape the meanings that bodies inscribe on themselves? And, conversely, how do tattooed bodies reveal something essential about the urban spaces they inhabit? These questions are not merely aesthetic. They open onto fundamental issues of social inclusion and exclusion, of cultural transmission and rupture, of individual freedom and collective control.

Our analytical framework draws on three theoretical pillars. First, Louis Wirth's (1938) conception of urbanism as a way of life, characterised by density, heterogeneity, and above all anonymity, the condition that loosens social control and makes marginal practices possible. Second, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and his concept of stigma, which illuminate how tattooed bodies are managed, displayed, and judged in the theatre of everyday life. Third, symbolic interactionism in the tradition of Howard Becker, for whom deviance is not an inherent quality of an act but the product of social definition: a community creates the deviant by labelling certain practices as transgressive. These theoretical tools are applied comparatively, navigating between two urban contexts whose differences are immediately striking.

2. Theoretical framework: The city, the body, and symbolic meaning

2.1 Urbanism as a way

Louis Wirth's foundational essay (1938) proposed that the city is not simply a demographic concentration but a distinctive social form. The urban way of life is characterised by secondary, transient, and segmental social relations, a high degree of division of labour, and crucially a condition of anonymity. For Wirth, anonymity is not merely the absence of recognition; it is a structural feature of the modern metropolis that profoundly alters the individual's relationship to social norms.

As Souiah (2019) has argued in his work on the Oran neighbourhood of Ras El Ain, anonymity functions as what Colette Pétonnet described as a 'protective membrane' for the individual. Women who wear the veil inside their neighbourhood remove it when they enter the city centre, shielded by the city's anonymity from the gaze and judgement of their immediate community. We observe something analogous with tattooing: young Oranians travel from smaller interior cities to get tattooed in Oran precisely because its urban anonymity offers protection from local surveillance. The city is not merely where the practice happens; it is what makes it possible.

2.2 Stigma and the construction of deviance

For symbolic interactionists, meaning is not inherent in things but is produced through social interaction. This is particularly relevant to tattooing, whose symbolic charge has shifted dramatically over time and varies enormously across social contexts. As Goffman (1973) argued, social identity is managed through 'performances' in the theatre of everyday life. The tattooed body is one such performance: it communicates, whether the bearer wishes it or not, a social position and an implied moral status.

Becker's concept of 'outsiders' is equally illuminating. The deviant is not someone who possesses a fixed intrinsic quality of wrongness; deviance is a label applied by those who define the rules. In Oran's urban context, those who exceed conventional boundaries of bodily presentation, particularly young women who tattoo themselves, risk being assigned to the category of the moral outsider, regardless of their own intentions. Yet, as Becker also insists, this assignment is never absolute: a tattooed footballer or musician may be excused on the grounds that he 'grew up in a different environment'. Social position mediates the application of the stigma label.

2.3 Social representations as analytical lens

Denise Jodelet's concept of social representations (forms of socially constructed knowledge that perform the practical function of shaping shared social reality) provides our third analytical anchor. Tattoos do not carry universal meanings; they are read through systems of representation that vary by gender, social class, cultural context, and generational position. Our fieldwork in both Oran and Cologne aimed precisely to map these systems: to understand not only what tattooed people say about their tattoos, but what different social actors (family members, urban passersby, professional tattoo artists) project onto tattooed bodies.

3. Fieldwork in Oran: tattooing between centre and margin

3.1 The historical background: From rural ritual to urban practice

In the Maghrebi tradition, tattooing was historically a predominantly rural and feminine practice. Carried out by experienced elder women in collective, sometimes ceremonial contexts, the tattoos placed on the chin, forehead, or hands of young women at puberty or before marriage served multiple overlapping functions: markers of tribal and family identity, protective talismans against the evil eye, indices of social status, and expressions of bodily beauty inseparable from a specific cosmological framework.

Scholars such as Halayemia (2021), studying Chaouia women, and Qanfisi (2006), analysing tattoo symbolism in the Kabylie region, have documented this traditional practice in detail. Both confirm that traditional tattoo motifs (suns, crescents, geometric and vegetal patterns) were dense symbolic texts legible within their social community. Mekyed and Baqa Belkheir (2025) further emphasise that even when aesthetic pleasure was a motivation, the marks carried therapeutic and magical charge. Belhassan's work on Hassani women adds that tattooing marked the individual's position within the social hierarchy: 'the mark on the skin places the wearer in a narcissistic dimension of identityseeking, for the social relation is a true valorisation and ornamentation of magic and fascination, and it can also mark the belonging of a person.'

This historical background matters for understanding the present precisely because contemporary urban tattooing in Oran operates in explicit contrast to this tradition. It is practised by young men as well as women; it takes place in specialised commercial studios or beauty salons; its motifs are drawn from global visual culture (celebrities, musical symbols, compass roses, script in various languages) rather than from local cosmological repertoires. The break is not total, some wearers inscribe deeply local markers, such as the phrase 'my mother, my first and last love', but the overall shift from collective ritual to individual choice, from rural symbolism to global aesthetics, is decisive.

3.2 The fieldwork setting: Studios, salons, and the urban fabric

Our fieldwork was conducted using an ethnographic methodology combining semistructured interviews with tattooed young people, professional tattoo artists, beauty salon workers, and ordinary urban residents, alongside direct observation inside tattoo workshops and salons. The multisited nature of the fieldwork allowed us to capture the diverse institutional forms through which tattooing is practised in contemporary Oran.

Two fieldwork sites merit particular attention. The first is the workshop known as 'Joker', observed on 24 February 2025. The space is immediately marked by a claim to professional artistic status: three large armchairs, a glass table bearing drawing tools and a laptop, framed works by the studio owner covering the walls, a large plasma screen. Appointments are mandatory; walkins are not accepted. The practice of tattooing is here reframed as a specialised craft service, legitimised by its placement within the codes of contemporary artistic professionalism. As we note in our observation grid, the spatial visibility and accessibility of the studio (easily found on a simple digital map search) indicates a degree of centralisation and normalisation of the practice within this urban district, even if it remains far from the total normalisation we would later observe in Cologne.

The second site is 'Nina Beauté', a beauty salon in the Lofti neighbourhood, observed on 20 April 2025. Here tattooing appears as one element in a chain of bodily care services (alongside nail treatment, hairdressing, and hair removal) within an affective and intimate atmosphere characterised by recurring visits and accumulated trust between client and practitioner. The contrast between the two sites is analytically significant: in 'Joker', the tattoo is a rational aesthetic object produced by individual creative decision; in 'Nina Beauté', it is woven into the affective fabric of female bodily selfcare, embedded in a fundamentally different social temporality.

3.3 The voices of the tattooed: A typology of representations

The interviews we gathered in Oran reveal a rich spectrum of motivations and meanings that defies reduction to any single narrative. We propose to organise them into five overlapping representational registers.

The most frequently recurring theme is that of the body as personal property: 'my body is mine... I do with it what I want.' Tattooing is framed as a space of selfdetermination, a refusal of community surveillance. One of our interlocutors had tattooed wings on his arm, explaining: 'they represent freedom. I want to fly away from everything.' This discourse constructs the tattoo as a visible symptom of emancipation from social control, what we might call, following our interviewees' own logic, the illusion of freedom: the mark makes the experience of escape visible without actually dissolving the social judgements it provokes.

A significant proportion of our interviewees spoke of the tattoo in explicitly aesthetic terms as decoration, as fashion, as a way of 'looking good'. 'I wanted something light, like a bracelet or a rose, just to give a look.' Here the body becomes a surface for contemporary selfpresentation, shaped by media images and celebrity aesthetics. As we observe, this globalised aesthetic dimension does not exclude localised content: a number of our interviewees inscribed expressions in Algerian dialect or symbols tied to specifically Algerian cultural references, creating what we would describe as a hybrid form, where global codes are reprocessed through local sensibilities.

Several young men and women had tattooed the name or initial of a parent or loved one. 'I wrote my mother's name. It is my signature; I show that family comes first.' In these cases, the tattoo functions as a permanent memory object, an anchor of relational identity inscribed in the skin. Goffman's (1973) concept of the presentation of self is directly relevant here: when the individual offers their tattooed arm or wrist to the gaze of others, they are performing a particular version of themselves, one in which the private affective bond has been made publicly legible.

Among the interviewees who had experienced or aspired to migration, tattoo motifs (compass roses, waves, maps) functioned as spatial metaphors for movement. A former undocumented migrant explained his compass tattoo: 'that means I am a traveller... so I always remember the road.' Another spoke of a symbol meaning 'zarbouti', evoking the spinning top, a popular children's game, here repurposed as a metaphor for the capacity to adapt to shocks and disorientation in the course of an irregular migration journey. The body becomes a cartography of desire, a record of journeys undertaken or imagined, and in some cases a testimony to experiences too dangerous or too shameful to narrate in words.

Some interviewees, particularly those who had experienced marginalisation, used the tattoo explicitly as a statement of defiance. 'I wrote Strong... to remind myself that I can overcome life's difficulties.' Others had tattooed three dots, explaining that this symbol means being 'against the law.' The body becomes, in Goffman's terms, a front stage for protest, a site on which the individual makes a public claim about their position relative to social norms and institutional power.

3.4 The social gaze: Stigma and its modulations

The social representations of tattooing in Oran are deeply ambivalent. Among older and more conservative urban residents, tattooed bodiesparticularly women'sare read as signs of moral transgression. Several young women we met in the course of our research had placed their tattoos on hidden parts of the body precisely to avoid the consequences of public exposure, and some declined to participate fully in interviews, their fear of social judgement alive even in a private conversation with a researcher.

Yet the application of stigma is far from uniform. Social position mediates its force in ways that confirm Becker's analysis. Certain tattooed public figuresAlgerian footballers playing in foreign leagues, musiciansare exempted from condemnation on the grounds that they 'grew up in a different environment' or belong to a separate moral community. The same mark that stigmatises one body is excused on another. This selectivity in the enforcement of normative rules reproduces and reinforces existing social hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Medical tattooing occupies a further exceptional position. Women who have undergone mastectomies, diabetic patients whose tattoos communicate medical information, athletes using tattooing in physical rehabilitation: these practices are socially tolerated on the grounds of necessity, invoking the Islamic legal principle that 'necessity makes licit what is forbidden'. This differential acceptance confirms that it is not the act itself that is judged but the social subject who performs it and the intention attributed to themwhich is precisely the mechanism that Becker identified as the core operation of the social construction of deviance.

At the level of the family, we observe a transformation that relates to the structural shift Durkheim described in terms of 'moral density'. One of our interviewees, a tattooed nurse working at the university hospital of Oran and a mother of family, explained: 'It is none of their business. I am my husband's wife, not his parents' and siblings' wife. And my husband loves my tattoos.' This statement encapsulates the new social dynamics of the urban nuclear family, in which the authority of the extended kinship group over the body and its presentation is being progressivelyif unevenlyeroded.

4. Fieldwork in Cologne: Tattooing as normalised urban practice

4.1 The phenomenology of difference: First observations

When we arrived in Cologne in December 2025, the contrast with Oran presented itself as an almost immediate perceptual experience. In public spaces, the visual prevalence of visible tattoos was striking. Even a rapid observation of young people in the city was sufficient to confirm what a simple map search also revealed: tattoo studios are not hidden or stigmatised spaces in Cologne. They are located in ordinary commercial streets, listed openly on digital platforms, their windows displaying examples of artistic work on offer. The normalisation of tattooing is spatially inscribed in the urban fabric itselffinding studios required no effort whatsoever, several appearing in close proximity to our accommodation.

Beyond this immediate visual observation, we noted a quality of social interaction in Cologne that contrasted sharply with Oran: a distinctive individuation, a codification of interpersonal distance, a 'framing' of social encounters that reduced their spontaneous intimacy. This observation animated our central comparative hypothesis: if urban social relations in Cologne are characterised by a stronger degree of individualism and social distance, what implications does this have for tattooinga practice so intimately linked to the body, visibility, and social perception? We came to Cologne as someone formed by the social density of Oran, and the encounter defamiliarised both contexts simultaneously.

4.2 Encounters with Cologne tattoo studios

Our exploratory fieldwork involved visits to multiple tattoo studios, with the aim of conducting semistructured interviews with professional tattoo artists. The range of encounters is itself informative: the first studio visited was closed; at the second, the artist was engaged with a client but exchanged contact details and allowed us to photograph the space; the third declined any participation, the artist stating they did not have time for 'these things'. This variety of responsesfrom willing openness to polite refusalconfirms both the accessibility and the professional selfregulation of the Cologne tattoo world, where practitioners are under no particular social pressure to account for or justify their activity.

The single indepth interview we were able to conduct, at Santa Sangre Tattoo Parlour in Cologne, proved exceptionally rich. The tattoo artist described his studio as 'a shop with a warm, welcoming atmosphere, shaped by a group of individualists who share a passion for tattooing.' This framing is immediately notable: in contrast to the quasiclandestine contexts or the beautysalon settings of Oran tattooing, the Cologne artist speaks of a visible community of practice, a collective identity built openly around craft and shared aesthetic passion.

4.3 Professional identity and the historical consciousness of the field

Our interlocutor offered a historically grounded account of his profession that proved invaluable for the comparative analysis. He noted that the Cologne tattoo scene has changed significantly over recent decades, particularly since the 1980s and 1990s, when tattooing was still firmly associated with marginal subcultures. The contemporary landscape, by contrast, is characterised by many highly skilled artists and 'very collegial' relations between studios. This observation challenges older representations of tattooing as a competitive underground practice, and maps onto a broader European trajectory in which tattooing migrated from subculture to mainstream cultural industry over approximately three decades.

His selfpresentation as a professional was articulated in explicitly artistic terms: 'I am selftaught. To me, a tattoo artist is first and foremost an artist, even though craftsmanship plays an important role.' He further anchored tattooing in a sweeping historical claim: it is 'the oldest art form known to humankind.' This artistic framing performs a work of symbolic legitimation, distancing the practice from its historical associations with marginality and criminality and repositioning it as a form of high cultural expression. We found it significant that no equivalent legitimating discourse was needed or offered by the practitioners we met in Oranwhere the question of legitimacy remains structurally open and contested, rather than already resolved.

4.4 Clientele, motifs, and the social sociology of normalisation

Our interlocutor's account of his clientele reinforces the picture of radical social normalisation. 'People from all social backgrounds get tattooed, and there is hardly any difference between men and women when it comes to choosing motifs.' This observation echoes what we had ourselves observed in public space: tattoos visible across genders, age groups, and apparent social positions. The classcrossing and genderneutral character of contemporary Cologne tattooing marks a decisive difference from Oran, where female tattooing in particular still carries disproportionately heavy stigma.

On the question of meaning, the artist pointed to a historically significant shift in symbolic function: 'In the past, tattoos were a way of setting oneself apart; today, they are often a way of expressing belonging.' Where the tattoo once functioned as a badge of difference from mainstream society, it has become a vehicle of belongingto aesthetic communities, to shared visual cultures, to the broad social mainstream. He further noted the role of social imitation and image circulation in creating tattoo trends: 'people frequently choose motifs based on what they see on others, which is how trends in tattoo imagery are created.' This observation resonates directly with our own findings in Oran, where global media and social network images were frequently cited as the source of tattoo inspiration.

Common motifs in his practice include depictions of parentchild relationships, predominantly in black and grey realistic styles, and classic western traditional designs. Preferred body sites are arms, legs, and the torso, while neck and hands are 'usually reserved for more experienced tattoo wearers.' Coverup workprofessionally concealing poorly executed or unwanted tattoosforms a growing part of his practice, a detail that speaks to the longevity and complexity of tattooing as a lived bodily commitment rather than a passing aesthetic choice.

The artist's summary description of the contemporary status of tattooing in Cologne encapsulates the comparison: 'Tattoos used to be a symbol of being an outsider, but today they are firmly established in the middle of society,' adding that 'even face tattoos rarely lead to social exclusion anymore.' The statement that might describe an aspiration in Oran describes a completed social fact in Cologne.

5. Comparative analysis: Two cities, two symbolic orders

5.1 Anonymity and its different geographies

Both cities offer their inhabitants a degree of anonymity, but of different kinds and with different effects on the practice of tattooing. In Cologne, anonymity is structural and taken for granted: the individual moves through a dense, heterogeneous urban space in which no single moral community exercises total surveillance. The tattoo is simply one among many individual choices that the city toleratesor, more precisely, one that it no longer registers as a choice requiring tolerance at all.

In Oran, anonymity is more selective and contextual. The city does offer relative freedom from the intensive surveillance of the village, the tribe, or the tightknit neighbourhoodand this is not merely theoretical. The tattoo professionals we interviewed in Oran mentioned that clients sometimes travel from smaller interior cities precisely to benefit from the metropolitan anonymity that Oran offers. The city is, in this sense, a resource that individuals actively mobilise to protect their bodily choices from the reach of their local communities. Yet Oran's anonymity is never complete: family networks, neighbourhood ties, and the moral authority of religious discourse continue to exercise real power. The tattooed person navigates between zones of relative freedom and zones of surveillance, managing visibility carefully.

In his study of female presence in public space in the Oran neighbourhood of Ras El Ain, Souiah (2019) documented a practice that illuminates this dynamic: women wore the veil inside their neighbourhood, where the tight social fabric imposed strict normative expectations, but removed it freely when entering the city centre, sheltered by what Pétonnet called the 'protective membrane' of urban anonymity. We see an analogous dynamic at work with tattooing: the city offers a space in which the tattooed body can circulate without being subjected to the full weight of normative judgement, even if this protection is always partial and contextual.

5.2 Centre and margin as symbolic geography

The analytical framework of centre and margin, central to our Oran research, acquires a comparative dimension in the light of the Cologne fieldwork. In Oran, tattooing occupies a position at the symbolic margins of social acceptability: it is practised, increasingly, but under conditions of reticence, concealment, and constant risk of moral judgement. The tattooed body in Oran has ventured toward the marginnot a geographical periphery but a symbolic one, the space of the morally transgressive.

In Cologne, this symbolic geography is radically reconfigured. Tattooing has migrated from the margins to what our interlocutor himself described as 'the middle of society.' The symbolic centrewhich our Oran analytical framework identifies as the position of full social inclusionnow encompasses tattooed bodies without reservation. The very question of whether a tattoo marks its bearer as deviant is simply not posed in most social situations in contemporary Cologne.

This comparison illuminates a broader sociological truth: the boundary between centre and margin is not a universal constant but a historically and culturally specific construction. What one urban society places at its symbolic periphery, another has absorbed into its core. The body is the site on which this construction becomes visible and legibleand our fieldwork in both cities suggests that the trajectory from margin to centre is not unilinear or inevitable, but depends on specific social, cultural, and historical conditions that must be identified rather than assumed.

5.3 A shared historical trajectory at different speeds

Despite their current differences, Oran and Cologne share a historical trajectory: in both cities, contemporary tattooing marks a break from traditional or subcultural forms of body marking toward an individualised, aestheticised, globallyinflected practice. The traditional Maghrebi tattoo was collective, ritual, cosmological; the contemporary Algerian urban tattoo is individual, aesthetic, expressive of a self constituted against the background of global media culture. The traditional German subculture tattoo was a marker of social outsider status; the contemporary Cologne tattoo is a mainstream aesthetic choice.

In both contexts, the shift from collective to individual, from group identity to personal expression, tracks broader transformations in social organisation: the weakening of extended family structures, the rise of individual autonomy, the penetration of global media and consumer culture into everyday life. Wirth's model of urban anonymity and Durkheim's concept of moral density both help explain why these shifts occur more rapidly and more completely in large metropolitan centres than in smaller environments.

The difference lies in the pace and completeness of this transformation. In Cologne, the shift has been essentially completed over the past three decades. In Oran, the shift is ongoing and contested: tattooing is proliferating, but the moral and religious frameworks that define it as transgressive have not been dissolved. This creates the specific tension that characterises our Oran fieldworka practice that is increasingly widespread yet retains the stigmatic charge of the marginal, producing what we might call a condition of suspended normalisation.

5.4 The researcher between two urban worlds

We cannot conclude this comparative analysis without addressing its reflexive dimension. To conduct fieldwork in both Oran and Cologne as a researcher formed by the Algerian urban experience is not a neutral operation. We arrived in Cologne already equipped with a specific theoretical and empirical sensitivity, developed through months of fieldwork on a practice that in Oran carries real social weight and risk. This sensitivity shaped what we saw and how we interpreted it.

More broadly, we would suggest that the comparative encounter generates a form of double defamiliarisation. The experience of Cologne's radical normalisation of tattooing forces us to see the contingency of Oran's contested social landscapeto understand that what appears as a fixed cultural reality is in fact a historical configuration subject to change. And conversely, the Oran fieldwork sharpens our perception of Cologne: it prevents us from naturalising the German city's normalisation, from treating it as a selfevident social fact rather than a specific historical achievement whose conditions cannot be assumed to be universal.

6. Conclusions:

Tattooing, as we have argued throughout this article, is not simply a fashion trend or an aesthetic choice. It is a social practice that makes visible the deep structures of urban life: the forms of social control and their limits; the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion; the tensions between individual expressivity and collective normativity; the historical dynamics through which the marginal mayor may notbecome mainstream.

The comparison between Oran and Cologne has served to defamiliarise both contexts, making visible what remains invisible when each is studied in isolation. In Cologne, the complete normalisation of tattooing might appear as a simple sociological fact. Seen from Oran, it becomes a specific historical achievement, the product of a particular trajectory of urban transformation whose conditions cannot be assumed to be universal. In Oran, the persistence of stigma around tattooing might appear as evidence of cultural 'backwardness' viewed through a normative lens. Seen comparatively, it reveals instead the ongoing work of symbolic boundarymaintenance in a society undergoing rapid transformationone in which the contested body is one of the most visible sites of negotiation between changing values and inherited frameworks of meaning.

The tattooed body, in both cities, is a social text. But the language in which it is written, and the community of readers who decode it, differ profoundly. In Oran, the tattooed body speaks into a social field still structured by dense normative expectations, religious frameworks, and intergenerational tensionsand it is heard, variously, as an act of transgression, a cry for freedom, a record of migration, or a mark of identity. In Cologne, it speaks into a social field in which its voice has become so common as to be largely unremarkablewhich is itself, perhaps, the final and most complete form of normalisation.

What our research ultimately reveals is that the body is not merely a surface on which individuals express themselves freely. It is a social surface, contested, governed, and negotiatedand the city, with its specific configurations of anonymity, density, and symbolic power, is the arena in which this negotiation takes place. To study the tattooed body ethnographically, moving between Oran and Cologne, is to study the city itself.

REFERENCES

1. Becker, H. S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance. Free Press.
2. Belhassan, M. (2019). La femme hassanie et la culture du corps: Une approche anthropologique de la corporéité. AlWatan alYawm.
3. Durkheim, É. (1898). Représentations individuelles et représentations collectives. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, 6*, 273–302.
4. Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford University Press.
5. Goffman, E. (1963). Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity. Prentice-Hall.
6. Goffman, E. (1973). *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne: Tome 1. La présentation de soi*. Éditions de Minuit. Original work published 1959.
7. Grafmeyer, Y. (1994). *Sociologie urbaine*. Nathan Université.
8. Habib Grine, A. (2025). Le tatouage dans l'espace urbain oranais: Représentations sociales et identité juvénile [Unpublished master's thesis]. Université d'Oran 2.
9. Halayemia, D. (2021). Le tatouage et le langage du corps: Étude psychosémiotique, la femme Chaouia comme modèle. *Dafatir Makhbar al-Shi'riyya al-Jaza'iriyya, 6*(1), 38–46.
10. Jodelet, D. (1989). Représentations sociales: Un domaine en expansion. In D. Jodelet (Ed.), *Les représentations sociales* (pp. 47–78). Presses Universitaires de France.
11. Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *La pensée sauvage*. Plon.
12. Mekyed, I., & Baqa Belkheir. (2025). La symbolique du tatouage chez la femme dans la région de Tiaret entre thérapie et embellissement. *Revue des Sciences Humaines et de la Civilisation, 7*(1), 64–82.
13. Qanfisi, H. (2006). *La symbolique sociale du tatouage dans la région de Kabylie entre tradition et modernité* [Unpublished magister thesis]. Université d'Alger, Faculté des Sciences Sociales.
14. Shils, E. (1981). *Tradition*. University of Chicago Press.
15. Souiah, M. (2019). De la présence féminine dans la rue: Stratégies d'accession à l'espace public dans un quartier spontané, Ras El Ain–Oran (Algérie). *Revue Africaine de Sociologie / African Sociological Review, 23*(2), 96–109.
16. Wirth, L. (1938). Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology, 44*(1), 1–24.
17. Wirth, L. (1996). Le phénomène urbain comme mode de vie. In Y. Grafmeyer & I. Joseph (Eds.), *L'École de Chicago: Naissance de l'écologie urbaine* (pp. 165–184). Aubier.