Tattoos finally are uncool. Only idiots have them any more!

From Adam Levine at the Super Bowl to Justin Bieber's Vogue shoot, tattoos are having a fashion moment. But that may not make them more sought-after

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Wed 13 Feb 2019 03.00 EST

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▲ Justin Bieber and Hailey Baldwin in the March 2019 edition of [US Vogue](). Photograph: Annie Leibovitz/AmericanVogue.com

There were two significant moments in the tattooing world last week. First, Adam Levine, of the curiously popular band Maroon 5, took his top off [during the Super Bowl](), revealing to the world a sprawling collection of ink. Then Justin Bieber stripped off for an US Vogue cover shoot with Hailey Baldwin, tattoos visible in every shot, his artwork more the focus than the clothes Vogue had dressed him in. Rarely do tattoos appear so prominently on the front of such a prestigious fashion magazine. Bieber's tattoos making a rare centre-stage appearance on the cover of Vogue should earn sleeves extra kudos – but has it?

Some are wondering if tattoos have finally gone mainstream, jumped the shark (one of Levine's tattoos is actually of a shark), or even become uncool. But of course, people have been wondering this for years. Decades, even.

"You can go back to 1880, and even probably beforehand," says Dr Matt Lodder, a tattoo expert and lecturer in art history at the University of Essex, "and there are articles about ['Now tattoos are]()

middle class', or ['Shock horror, women are getting tattoos now'](#), or whatever it may be."

▲ Adam Levine of Maroon 5 strips off at the Super Bowl. Photograph: Al Bello/Getty Images

Lodder, whose exhibition British Tattoo Art Revealed is touring the UK, adds that while "more people are getting tattoos than ever", another reason they seem more common is that in 2019 we all have the freedom to show more skin than in, say, the 1950s. "If your bank manager had a tattoo, you'd never see it," Lodder says. "Now, we're much more comfortable about showing skin and rolling up sleeves."

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But as someone who has tattoos, I felt distinctly uncomfortable seeing Levine prancing about topless during the Super Bowl. Seeing him held up, in front of hundreds of millions of viewers, as the example of a tattooed man is like your boss declaring they, too, went to that niche music festival, or someone you dislike declaring they are also into that obscure sitcom. He's ruining it for the rest of us.

The [mostly negative](#) response to Levine's artwork may be partly because so much of it looks new. The lines are too crisp, the ink too dark. It's also a bit too on-point. It's all tigers and roses: a look that prompted one Twitter user to muse that Levine "[is tattooed like he's the main character in Memento](#) but the mystery is where he left his Juul [e-cigarette]".

▲ American Vogue. Photograph: Annie Leibovitz/AmericanVogue.com

That's probably what makes me uncomfortable: there's something distinctly uncool about a brand new tattoo. And I only have brand new tattoos.

I came late to tattooing. Having narrowly avoided getting a Celtic band in 2003, it took me a full 14 years before I actually sat down in the tattoo chair. That meant I also avoided the late 1990s/early 2000s Chinese symbol trend, a fashion Ariana Grande recently revived when she had "small barbecue grill" inked on to her palm – but also that I will never be able to claim any of my tattoos were some sort of youthful indiscretion.

I'm unable to shake off that sense of being an outsider, something of a fraud. And seeing Levine hopping about during

the middle of an American football game, all crisp tattoos and dad dancing, brought all my own paranoia to the surface. I'm a bit embarrassed. It was a bit too close to home.

"There are plenty of super-cool tattooed people and there are some people that absolutely aren't," Lodder says. "Adam Levine being tattooed doesn't affect me at all, the same way Robbie Williams doesn't, or Samantha Cameron doesn't."

That's a better way to look at it. All tattoos were created equal. It's just … it's Adam Levine. And sometimes [Justin Bieber](#).