Images of Identity in Consumer Research: a Study of the Worship, Experimentation, Community and Domination of Signs

Lauren Gurrieri, Griffith University, Australia
Helene Cherrier, Griffith University, Australia

This paper seeks to understand how consumers negotiate contested symbolic meanings ‘permanently’ marked on the body. It offers four images of identity – assumed, trialled, tribal and trapped. In doing so, the research aims to provide a metaphorical understanding of identity work in consumer research.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009766/volumes/v39/NA-39

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
ABSTRACT
This paper seeks to understand how consumers negotiate contested symbolic meanings ‘permanently’ marked on the body. It offers four images of identity – assumed, trialled, tribal and trapped. In doing so, the research aims to provide a metaphorical understanding of identity work in consumer research.

The Discursive Construction of the Consuming Subject
In contemporary consumer culture, consumption is considered a key site from which one discursively constructs their identity, whereby ‘we are what we consume’ (Bauman 2007). Accordingly, Arnould and Thompson (2005) identify consumer identity projects as a research program of consumer culture theory. This focus on consumption is the consequence of the fragmented consumer of postmodernity, whose sense of self is no longer conceived as a unified construction driven by well-defined, purposeful and rational needs, instead comprising fragmented patterns of consumption and engagement in multiple experiences (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). As identity is constantly changing and emergent, it is through consumption and its symbolic meanings, as constituted through enduring socio-historic discourses, that consumers are able to construct identities (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Two views of this postmodern condition exist (Goulding, Shankar and Elliott 2002). First, a more pessimistic view of society as dystopian and alienating, conceives fragmented consumers fraught with identity confusion and struggling with sign domination (e.g. Baudrillard 1981; Jameson 1984). In the absence of overarching narratives, the self is placed in a position of vulnerability and dominant discourses create normalising or disciplinary effects, with various social and historical forces affecting identity work and constraining individuals in ways that attempt to inscribe what can be said and who can be what. Second, a more liberatory account presents subjects embracing fragmentation as a force that frees them from conformity. In the place of traditional institutions, consumption becomes a means of constructing and expressing multiple identities (e.g. Firt and Venkatesh 1995). Under this perspective, the self becomes a symbolic project and consumers express accounts of who they are from available symbolic materials, which also provide a means of participating in social life (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Featherstone 1991).

In addition to these two conceptualisations, consumer identity construction can be read as a dialectical or dialectical process emerging from a tension between ‘sign experimentation’ and ‘sign domination’ (Murray 2002), namely interplay between agency and structure. In this perspective, mass consumption, social categories and normative discourses influence consumption patterns yet still allow for a form of creative identity play. For example, Holt and Thompson’s (2004, 439) study of masculinity in America conceives social categories as a frame of reference that “encourage and constrain particular kinds of consumer creativity”. Similarly, Murray (2002) shows consumers’ construction of style resulting from a tension between sign experimentation and sign domination. On the one hand consumers draw on the meanings of signs to construct symbolic statements about themselves and on the other they respond to normalising and disciplinary discourses ascribing what can be said and what can be worn.

Whilst understanding the dialectical interplay between agency and structure has been a preoccupation in studies on non-permanent consumption behaviour, very few studies have discussed the agency/structure interplay in permanent forms of body alteration such as body sculpting, piercing, scarification and tattoo. For example, Askergaard, Gertsen and Langer’s (2002) study on plastic surgery adopts an agentic approach to an individual’s reflexive construction of identity. Similarly, Sanders’ (1985) study on tattoo consumption accepts the agentic power of deviant consumers who manoeuvre the risks of consuming marginal products. In contrast to this view of consumption as an expressive movement taking place in open discursive systems, Patterson and Schroeder (2010) consider tattoo consumption resulting from a dialectical interplay between agency/sign experimentation and structure/sign domination. For the authors, the skin “reflects the dynamic relationship between inside and outside, self and society, between personal identity projects and marketplace cultures. It represents the meeting place of structure and agency; a primary site for the inscription of ideology and a text upon which individuals write their own stories” (Patterson and Schroeder 2010, 254). Under this perspective, identity becomes something worked on by multiple actors, bridging the individual and the social (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). For embodied identity statements such as tattoos, the interpretations that take place between actors can be diverse, contested and complex. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) note that tattooing brings with it a set of competing and contested understandings between the individual and group, deviant and mainstream, public and private, personal and social and subject and object. It is this instability and ambiguity of both the skin and tattooing which make them rich sites for examinations of consumer identity construction as a dialogical process between agency and structure.

Taking a dialectical and multifaceted view of identity construction, this paper seeks to understand how consumers navigate across contested symbolic meanings ‘permanently’ marked on the body, shifting the focus from meaning to action. In contrast to Patterson and Schroeder’s (2010) study on tattoo consumption amongst heavily tattooed women we consider one particular tattoo, the Southern Cross tattoo, which symbolises heavily contested meanings in Australia. Our objectives are threefold. First, we contribute to the consumer culture theory debate on the agency/structure dialectic in the consumption of permanent bodily modification. Second, we offer insights on what consumers do with the multiplicity of symbolic meanings available to them, shifting the focus from meaning to action. Finally, we propose four images of consumer identity – assumed, trialled, tribal and trapped – to provide a metaphorical understanding of identity work in consumer research.

Methodological Overview
Discourse analysis was conducted on texts derived from a combination of data collection procedures. Firstly, netnographic data on the Southern Cross tattoo was collected from weblogs, online tattoo discussion forums and news reports to provide a genealogical understanding of the symbol. Secondly, interviews of 60 to 120 minutes in length were conducted with five Australian informants based in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane who have the Southern Cross tattoo. Finally, memos and reflections written at various stages of the empirical process were documented and collected to facilitate reflexivity. The analysis sought to identify the ways identity was constructed and worked upon. Informed by grounded analysis procedures (Locke 2001), the interview data was coded using a three-stage process of open coding, identification of mid-level themes, and then broader conceptual categories. During this process we frequently returned to the literature to make sense of emerging experiences.
themes and to sharpen our interpretations as guided by constructionist sensitivities and assumptions about language. Collaborative readings of the data were also undertaken by the authors in order to bring multiple perspectives to the data, its coding and subsequent interpretations.

The Southern Cross Symbol and its Contested Meanings

The Southern Cross is a symbol fundamental to the Australian cultural psyche, providing an observable way for people to be recognised as belonging to the Australian ‘tribe’ (Maffesoli 1996). The Crux constellation is dominated by a cross-shaped asterism of four bright stars, commonly known as the Southern Cross. The Southern Cross has great significance in many cultures of the Southern Hemisphere where it is visible at any time of the year, unlike in the Northern Hemisphere where it is only occasionally seen by those south of latitude 30 degrees. For thousands of years, the Southern Cross has been an object of reverence around the world, such as for Christians who claim it was last visible from Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Over time, the Southern Cross has become most closely associated with the Australian identity.

The Southern Cross is an important element of Aboriginal Dreamtime, the Cross conceived as a stingeray being pursued throughout the southern sky by a shark (the pointers). The Crux itself is mythologised as a possum sitting in a tree that represents the sky deity Mirrabooka, a clever man immortalised into the night sky by Biami, the creator, to assist in watching over people on earth. Since the colonial era, the Southern Cross has been used as a national symbol in Australia, residing on various state and territory flags as well as the national flag, where the four stars are said to represent the moral virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. A stylised Southern Cross dominates the ‘Eureka flag’, first used in Victoria in 1854 as the battle flag of the Eureka Stockade – a key event in the development of Australian democracy where goldfield workers protested against Government sanctioned mining licenses. The Eureka flag has since continued as a symbol of protest, egalitarianism, liberty and revolution, particularly pertaining to class as reflected in its adoption by numerous trade unions. The Eureka flag has been proposed by the republican movement as an alternative national flag, as first suggested by the iconic poet Banjo Patterson in his poem ‘Our Own Flag’. Finally, the Southern Cross is referenced in the lyrics of the Australian national anthem, the title of the victory song of the Australian national cricket team whilst numerous institutions such as hospitals, universities and railway stations also bear the name ‘Southern Cross’, illustrating its deep cultural embodiment.

In recent times, two phenomena have resulted in the Southern Cross symbol taking on different and highly contested sets of meanings. Firstly, a growing trend towards ‘marketplace patriotism’ has emerged, whereby Australian symbols – overwhelmingly the Southern Cross – are emblazoned on every product imaginable. Consuming patriotism can be observed in the ever-increasing number of Australians, including Australian athletes at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, showing the emblem of the Southern Cross tattooed on their skin. Secondly, a nationalist, xenophobic ‘Aussie Pride’ movement that developed out of the racially motivated Cronulla riots has latched on to the Southern Cross symbol as emblematic of their ‘cause’. This is most clearly apparent in the ‘Southern Cross Soldiers’, a group who band together under the belief that “there is only one ethnicity in Australia: Australian” (SCS website, 2010). The Southern Cross Soldiers are the largest organised group aligned to the ‘Aussie pride’ movement with chapters throughout Australia. Members are tattooed with the Southern Cross as a way of algleying their membership to the group, which adopts a US ‘gangsta’ style through the appropriation of cultural expressions, such as rap music. As a consequence, the Southern Cross has taken on connotations of racial vilification, leading some to brand it the ‘Aussie Swazie’.

Whilst we may think of national symbols as sacred, non-contested, coherent, untouchable and ever present, the case of the Southern Cross illustrates the deep contestation of its meanings within contemporary Australian society, partially the consequence of these various appropriations. What does this mean for people who have chosen to permanently etch their skin with the symbol of the Southern Cross as a part of their own personal narrative? We explore this question in the ensuing sections, which provide insights into how consuming subjects engage with contested symbolic meanings in the process of identity construction. We begin by outlining the findings from the research study, which demonstrate that four discourses were drawn on in processes of identity construction for those engaging with the embodied experience of consuming the Southern Cross symbol as a tattoo, namely worship, experimentation, community and domination.

Discourses of Worship

Our informants drew on discourses of worship in talk about tattooing their skin with the Southern Cross. By imprinting their skin with the symbol, our informants performed an act of devotion that adoringly acknowledged their love for their country: Australia. They spoke about how they considered the Southern Cross to be a quintessentially Australian symbol, and by laying claim to it in this way the informants were able to demonstrate their avowal. Demi, a nurse aged 36, considers herself a “proud Australian” and inked her allegiance as an act of praise to the country in which she has lived her entire life:

There was no question of anything else. I wanted the Southern Cross and that was it. It shows I’m an Aussie ¼ The Southern Cross, it’s unique. There’s no explanation needed. You just know.

The strong emotions that were raised in speaking about her tattoo gave Demi goose bumps. She believed her tattoo provided her with “proof of my patriotism”, using her body as a text to “mark my territory” and “show how this means so much to me”. As Demi mentions in the excerpt above, the symbol is “unique” and does not need an explanation, it “shows I’m an Aussie.” Demi and all of our informants did not consider expressing their commitment to being Australian through any other symbol. They considered the Southern Cross to be the most highly recognisable symbol associated with Australia, thus best enabling them to communicate their national pride and “prove” (Demi) their heritage. Moreover, other national symbols, such as the flag, were “tainted” (Jack) by their association with Britain. In contrast, the Southern Cross was a sacred symbol (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Our informants celebrate their deep connection to their country using the Southern Cross as a value-expressive symbol to being “an Aussie” (Demi) and a “proud Australian” (Lion). For example, below Josh explains how the symbol is a sacred artefact that provides “social cohesion and societal integration” (Belk et al. 1989, 31):

It’s over my heart and they say things like you’re wearing your country over your heart that was why I got it there. It’s something that belongs to all of us whether you’re born here or not. If you choose to live here then I believe you choose to live under the Southern Cross, you choose to live our way – and then you’re entitled to have a tattoo of the Southern Cross.

For Josh, a construction worker aged 44, his Southern Cross tattoo signified his adherence to the ‘Australian way of life’, it was a mark that demonstrated he was committed to his country and maintaining its cultural traditions. Tattooing the Southern Cross is clearly not for the mass but is reserved to the “entitled” individuals who belong to Australia. Josh and all of our informants constructed their experience of being tattooed...
as affirming their devotion and being emblematic of a spiritual pledge taken for their country. The informants uncritically spoke about the Southern Cross as something greater than themselves. This was strongly reflective and nostalgic, with informants constructing their tattoo as a “tribute” (Josh) or mark of respect to cultural heroes who have passed on but are forever remembered for the ways they shaped the nation. As Leon, an electrician aged 19, reflects:

I’m proud of our ancestry, it makes us who we are and what we will be. I’ve got a grandfather that served in World War II, two of my uncles who served over in Timor and Afghanistan and so I’m proud of people who serve our country and make it a safe place to be. That makes me proud of who I am and where I’ve come from and what my country’s done. Yeah, what our country is and what it stands for and what it’s got to offer. When I was young I marched in the Anzac Day marches and wore my medals, I’ve just grown up with a pride knowing he served the country and served so that I can be here today. Yes, just made me proud at the end of the day, not just me but for everyone that’s here now.

Leon describes his Southern Cross tattoo as a psychic bridge to “our ancestry” and his “grandfather.” Wearing the Southern Cross denotes the bearer’s status of being Australian and descending from Australians. For many of our informants, this patriotic worship had far reaching consequences for their other consumption choices. For Josh, who was suffering from terminal cancer, various sacrifices were personally made in order to ensure he was duly “living under the Southern Cross”, always placing the country before himself:

I’ve got absolutely no desire to travel anywhere in the world until I’ve seen all of Australia and that’s never going to happen. There’s just too much to see here. So I’m never going to leave our shores because there’s nothing else I want to see first ¼ I was a farmer for about 16 years. I lost thousands and thousands of dollars worth of crops with hail storms and what have you. When I did have a good crop so did every other bugger and you couldn’t sell it. The idea of importing food into Australia is just absolute bullshit. I hate going into a supermarket in the middle of winter and finding cherries for sale. I mean you can’t, it’s just not right. We should not be importing food. We can produce everything that we need here. That’s what I believe anyway. So I only buy what we produce.

When pressed about what the Southern Cross symbol personally meant to them, most of the informants felt they were unable to answer. They considered the decision to get the tattoo not to be a rational, conscious one. Rather, the informants spoke of a kind of divine imperative or epiphany that drove them to ink their skins. As Leon noted, “I don’t think it’s something I wanted to do, it’s something I needed to do”. They constructed the Southern Cross as a sacred symbol, something extraordinary that was not to be tampered with but treated with respect and awe. This sacralisation of the Southern Cross further fuelled its construction as a symbol of reverence. For the informants, the tattoo provided them with an enduring expression of worship, its materiality functioning as a kind of sacrament. For Leon, undertaking the rite of tattooing the cross conferred upon him permanent sanctity. It provided a transcendent experience, and he was proud to be able to display the scars that signified the physical agony he made the sacrifice for:

It’s going to stay with me forever. It’s not something that will just go away, it’s pretty much there for good. It’s something I chose for everyone to see at all times. It’s a clear way of doing it. I wanted to express that I am proud of being Australian, whether it be the bearing of the cross or showing I went through the pain.

For other informants, the tattoo became so intimately connected with their being they came to regard it as a natural part of their body. As Demi noted, the tattoo became “an identity: it’s a mark, a stamp, a birthmark”. This naturally occurring state was reinforced through references to the cosmic connection of the symbol, namely the Southern Cross in the sky, the seemingly eternal nature of which was constructed as reflecting their permanent undertaking of tattooing. For Jack, a retail worker aged 26, both the constellation and his tattoo provided “a constant reminder of who I am and what it is to be Australian”. As many of the informants noted, both were “always there”. In this way, the Southern Cross symbol came to be emblematic of a kind of everlasting life, something to be worshipped and sacralised.

Discourses of Experimentation

In talk about their tattoo, the informants also drew on discourses of experimentation. The act of inking their skin enabled them to construct a narrative about who they were and facilitated a way of communicating their identity work to those around them. For Demi, her tattoo represented the trying of personal circumstances she had weathered and overcome to be the person she is today:

I think tattoos are an individual thing, because you choose what you want to have so it’s a personal thing. There’s always a story behind it. The taxi driver the other day had a black rose on his arm with the names of his parents who had passed, his brother and his cousin who are passed and that was his family memorial. He’ll continue to get names added. That was him whereas for me this is the Southern Cross ¼ your past and your history shapes who you are today, those mistakes and errors and outbursts and whatever in your past that has made you who you are ¼ about my ex-husband and about what he has done, that’s made me who I am ¼ it changed my life to move on and now I’ve got the confidence to show who I am.

Our informants felt that the act of imprinting their skin enabled them to draw on meanings of the symbol and rework them as part of their identity. For example, Jack tattooed his shoulder with the Southern Cross as a rite of passage to mark the end of his youth. For him, the meanings of rebellion associated with the symbol resonated with his personal narrative and he considered the tattoo to function as forever telling that story:

I guess it would be along the lines of the Eureka Flag, being the rebel thing to do. It’s probably become the younger generations’ Eureka Flag. It’s just something to do to rebel against modern society and everything else. It’s probably just to be different, in a way and not be stereotyped into one dimension type of stuff. Because probably at the time it was a rebellious thing that my parents weren’t huge tattoo fans. Then because I moved out of home for more independence it was another step towards that ¼ Just the choice to live how I want to live and do what I want to live. Just the freedom aspect to it. It’s just a part of me and it’s something that I have to show who I am.

The process of being tattooed with the Southern Cross allowed our informants to both appropriate its cultural meanings and construct their own personalised meanings. In this way, the informants engaged in acts of bricolage (De Certeau 1984), adopting and adapting symbolic resources to build their own stories. For Kate, a photographer in her mid 20s, her Southern Cross tattoo was a means of creatively expressing her personal myth — something fundamental about her life (Velliquette, Murray and Evers 2006). For Kate, the tattoo functioned as a way of remembering her home, family and friends.
when she was living overseas. In this way, the tattoo embodied her myth and enabled her to meaningfully interpret her life experiences:

I went to England and I was going to live there for two years and work and be away from home. I’m very attached to my family; we’re very, very close. I lived at home for quite a while and it was very hard moving out for the first time. I guess being an only child and being close to my parents, it was hard. So being over in England it was just being away from everything that I’ve known. No friends, family, no nothing. I didn’t know anybody in England ¼ there was nothing home about it over there. I wanted something that I could have with me wherever I was, I’d know I was home.

Yet, some informants struggled with the symbol being “public property” (Jack), perceiving its collective appropriation as hampering the interpretation of their embodied self-narrative. In response, some sought to modify the symbol as an act of self-expression. Leon personalised the symbol by placing it amongst others he believed collectively elaborated his identity. In doing so, he attempted to take control of its meanings, moving it from the public sphere to the private. Interestingly, Leon chose to augment his Southern Cross tattoo with other shared symbols commonly associated with the Australian national identity, signalling he still felt bound to observe an existing identity script.

Discourses of Community

For some informants, the Southern Cross tattoo provided a sense of belonging, functioning as an identity marker that signalled a shared consciousness with others. The informants divulged how strangers would approach them upon seeing the symbol, interested to hear their story, compare tattoos or communicate feelings of camaraderie. In this way the informants drew on discourses of community, constructing the tattoo as creating a dialogue with others that conferred social benefits. For Josh, his tattoo became a “uniform”, an identity badge that linked him to others connected to the symbol:

I like the way when you’re at the beach and you haven’t got a shirt on people notice it. Obviously they may have different opinions and different ideas as to why someone might get it. But to me it’s like they realise that I’m Australian ¼ It’s good to know that I’m a part of all of that. Like I belong. It’s a little stamp of being here, like part of Australia I guess. It’s just knowing that you’re part of a team.

Having branded themselves with the Southern Cross, the informants claimed they felt more connected to the legends, traditions and values commonly associated with being an Australian. In doing so, many of the informants came to perform an identity that slipped into typecasting of what a ‘typical’ Australian was considered to be. For instance, Jack emphasised how his ‘ockerisms’ or Australian clichés reinforced his belonging to the community accessible through his tattoo:

Out of what I’ve been told from my group of friends, I’m more Australian than anyone else. Just the way I act and a few of my sayings ¼ like the ‘no worries’ and ‘she’ll be right mate’, pretty much your stock standard Australian sayings will just come out naturally to me ¼ I guess it [the tattoo] may have appeared to have an effect on me to my friends and outsiders.

The communality of the tattoo also provided some informants with an understanding of the types of people to whom they felt akin. Leon noted his tattoo provided him entry to a group called ‘Aussie Patriotism Ink’, an online community who bond over patriotic symbols tattooed on the skin. Leon considered the people within the group to be likeminded in ways beyond the mere act of inking the skin:

It’s just a group of people like myself ¼ A lot of the blokes on the site I know are tradesmen. A lot of them go camping, love the outdoors, love sports, go 4WD and whatnot. Most of them are Caucasian, Australian, Christian ... I suppose you say they fit.

In a subcultural sense (Hebdige 1981), Leon shared how members of the group sought out a minority style interpreted in accordance with subversive values that were critical of dominant societal standards. Members embraced casual tradesperson attire such as ‘wifebeater’ singlets, stubby shorts and thongs and espoused nationalistic, xenophobic values that ran counter to the prevailing climate of political correctness:

When you try to express your love for your country and you see so many people that aren’t Australian it can be frustrating. There was more Australians living here than there is now and it’s more frustrating than anything seeing a country that you love and having so many other people moving into it ¼ you do want it for yourself. When I’m going camping I rarely see someone who is Asian or Indian ¼ I don’t think they share the same sort of beliefs and enjoy the same activities that we do.

Leon noted how having a Southern Cross tattoo brought together and identified members of the group empowering them to feel “more Australian”, however this also spilled over into understandings of who they were unlike and othered and excluded:

Discourses of Domination

Finally, informants drew on discourses of domination in talk about themselves and their tattoo. Some informants claimed they felt stereotyped as a result of their Southern Cross tattoo. For Kate, who was “ashamed” of her working class background and experienced considerable obstacles in coming out as gay, being classed as a ‘bogan’ or racist was a highly fraught identity struggle:

Even though to me it means something else, no one else knows that. So everyone thinks you’re that demographic. I know a few people who have it and they’re the typical tradies. I’m still centred around that fear - V8 supercars, Bathurst, football, tradie - because to me they’re all the people who have it. They’re all the people I’ve come across who have it or really just bogan people. That’s kind of the category I’ve been lumped in now. That’s what I see now that I’ve been pigeonholed ¼ it’s horrible.

For Kate, this stereotyping resulted in feelings of social exclusion, whereby the symbol came to dominate her identity and shape perceptions of what others thought of her. Describing it being “like a gang tattoo”, Kate felt branded as a deviant and outcast by the symbol. This created a sense of cultural anxiety, with Kate feeling the need to constantly reconstruct her identity to others to mitigate the undermining power of the Southern Cross upon her identity work. She claimed that the tattoo even attracted physical violence, to the extent that she was often concerned for her physical safety in public spaces. In this way, Kate ascribed considerable agency to the tattoo, constructing it as overpowering all other visible symbolic cues on her body that could be read to interpret her identity:
I just don’t feel the same with it. I always feel that sense of somebody looking at me, somebody judging me. It feels like it’s going to consume you and then you’re going to become that, you have to become that symbol that everybody thinks you are \( \frac{1}{3} \) it attracts a lot of anger and hate, others pick people out for having it. I feel that. If you go to a pub or a bar you don’t know if you’re going to be standing there and someone’s going to come up and have a go at you.

In an attempt to counter these feelings of categorisation, the informants employed various coping strategies and made particular sacrifices. Jack was always concerned about being approached by the “wrong type of people” because of his tattoo. For this reason, he kept his tattoo covered and hidden the vast majority of the time, only revealing it when in front of people he trusted such as family and friends. For Leon, who feels he has been unfairly treated and labelled as unintelligent as a result of his tattoo, his coping strategy was to “remember the reasons why I got it” in an attempt to reassert control over the symbol’s interpretation. Yet for Kate, it has reached the point where she feels she must dispose of the symbol by getting the tattoo covered up to disidentify herself from what she considers to be its negatively connoted meanings:

A lot of people, when I tell them I’m getting it covered over, a lot of my closer friends are like ‘oh it’s a part of who you are and we all know you for it’. It’s like yeah but it’s kind of not me anymore, I don’t want it. If I could scratch it off I would. If I could just get rid of it today I would. If I had the money right now I’d be gone down there and get her to do a design and get it right and get it done \( \frac{1}{3} \) I don’t want to get angry over it. It’s something that’s meant to make me feel good, it’s not meant to make me feel unhappy.

Kate tried growing her hair longer, wearing scarves and high collared shirts to cover the tattoo on her neck, but felt that its meanings still haunted her. By letting go of the symbol and its visibility entirely, Kate believes she can gain a sense of control over her identity construction, enabling her to “be myself again”. For her, this comes at the cost of needing to defend her identity and letting go of part of her personal history:

**Images of Identity: A Consumer Research Agenda**

We contend that the discourses outlined provide a useful lens for examining how identity has been constructed in consumer research. Extant research emphasises the interplay between agentic and structural forces in identity construction, whereby tensions arise in dialectical interactions between individuals acting in self-interest and social structures that seek to control their actions (e.g. Holt 2002). To Murray’s (2002) framework on the juxtaposition between sign experimentation and sign domination we add two forces that play critical roles in identity work, namely sign worship and sign community. Further, we propose that each sign discourse relates to an ‘image’ of identity. Image refers to the “overall idea or conceptualisation, capturing how researchers relate to — and shape — a phenomenon” (Alvesson 2010, 194). We offer four images of identity – assumed, trialled, tribal and trapped – to provide a metaphorical understanding of conceptualisations of identity work in consumer research. These are outlined in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourses</th>
<th>Images of identity</th>
<th>Key characteristics of identity work</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>Assumed</td>
<td>• Uncritical appropriation of symbolic meanings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity construction is driven by a spiritual-like quest to be associated with something ‘greater than oneself’</td>
<td>Muniz and Schau (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>O’Guinn and Belk (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Trialled</td>
<td>• Bricolage of symbolic meanings</td>
<td>Arnould and Price (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity construction is motivated by the desire for self-expression</td>
<td>Murray (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Tribal</td>
<td>• Sharing of symbolic meanings</td>
<td>Kozinets (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity construction is directed by being situated in a specific social space</td>
<td>Schouten and McAlexander (1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Trapped</td>
<td>• Inscription of symbolic meanings</td>
<td>Holt (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity construction is regulated and controlled by social structures</td>
<td>Murray (2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Sign Discourses and Images Of Identities**

In providing these images of identity, we seek to extend Arnould and Thompson’s (2005) framework of consumer culture theory, which identifies identity projects as a key research agenda for consumer researchers. By specifying four areas of research pertaining to consumer identity, we aim to provide a platform from which future researchers can navigate the diverse work that is currently undertaken in the field of identity. It is important to note that studies may simultaneously address multiple images of identity, which harbour slippage and overlap. Consequently, this framework does not purport to offer static ‘categories’ of identity, but rather function for the purpose of analytic explanation. Finally, as discursive approaches to identity represent a growing area of interest in marketing research (e.g. Ellis and Ybema 2010), this research seeks to offer a starting point for future investigations of the role that discourses play in constructing and legitimising relations, meanings and identities in the field of consumer research.
REFERENCES


