To Me Or Not to Me: Personal Body As Contested Ownership

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This paper advances extant knowledge about alternative forms of ownership. Through a longitudinal, multi-sited ethnography of the body modification phenomenon, we explore the lived experience of people whose legitimate entitlement to their body is contested. We identify factors facilitating/hindering the maintenance of individual ownership over the modified body.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper advances extant knowledge in the field of consumer studies dealing with alternative forms of ownership (access-based consumption, Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; hybrid economies, Scarabo 2015; liquid ownership, Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; and sharing, Belk 2010). In particular, we are interested in examining contested ownership, a subject position that has so far received scant attention in consumer studies. Contested ownership is defined as the market condition consumers experience whenever their entitlement to a given possession is jeopardized and they are faced with some form of economic, emotional, psychological, and/or social cost. Contested ownership extends the stream of research that has investigated the processes by which individual possessions are translated into shared possessions (Giesler 2008), and vice versa (Bradford and Sherry 2015; Epp and Price 2010; Visconti et al. 2010).

We explore contested ownership in the context of contemporary body modification practices (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtson 2013; Featherstone 1999; Patterson and Schroeder 2010). We give particular attention to non-mainstream forms of body modification (e.g., branding, scarification, sub-dermal implants) and body performance (e.g., body suspension), where contested ownership is particularly prominent. Nonetheless, we also include practices such as tattooing and piercing, not only for their widespread diffusion—in the US 21% of the population has at least one tattoo, with 20,000 tattoo studios and an annual revenue of the tattoo industry of about $2.3 billion (TAM 2015)—, but also because of the evidence that even a single tattoo or piercing can unleash vivid tensions around body ownership. The modified person uses his/her own body—an individual possession par excellence—to pursue some personal benefit, including artistic desires, augmented physical functionalities, beautification, identity expression, physical pleasure, psychological well-being, and social affiliation. Yet, several body-modified people report having been blamed, discriminated against or offended, both within their inner circle of family members and friends as well as in wider professional and social circles. We document a variety of affective, cultural, economic, legal, and social tensions characterizing the daily life of body-modified people. Our empirical study explores: (1) the lived experience of people whose legitimate entitlement to their body is contested; (2) the resources they mobilize in order to resist disenitlement; and, (3) the forces at play favoring disenitlement.

We adopt a longitudinal approach, with data being collected over eight years (2009-2016). Consistent with the market-oriented ethnographic tradition (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), we combined ethnographic interviews with observations in modifiers’ studios and during specific events (e.g., body suspension conventions), and observations of online forums (Kozinets 2002). We conducted 16 in-depth interviews (McCracken 1988) with 14 different informants (lasting from 90 minutes to several hours). 93 additional short interviews (lasting from 30 to 90 minutes), all semi-structured and obtained from different informants, complement our interview dataset. Internet observation was also multi-sited, yet focused on the Body Modification Enzine (BME.com), which has become the global gathering platform of the body modification community. In order to check for the cultural embeddedness of body modification meanings, practices, and ownership contestation, we collected data from more than 20 different countries. Overall, our dataset includes 1,218 pages of interview transcriptions, 32 pages of field notes, and 6,989 pages of netnographic data, all in Times New Roman 12, double-spaced. Besides our primary data, we also gathered a large amount of secondary data (articles, books, films), which served to explore the history of body modification as well as to triangulate our interpretations with those of other researchers. Secondary sources totaled approximately 1,215 pages of text and 330 minutes of video. We analyzed primary and secondary sources individually and then through open and axial coding (Spiggle 1994). QRS Nvivo assisted data analysis. Codes, categories, and themes resulted from an iterative process.

Our findings are centered on (inter)personal tensions arising from body modification and resulting in states of contested body ownership. By means of a semiotic square, we first document four types of subjective positions that body-modified people may experience with reference to their body: (1) the practical body, (2) the utopian body, (3) the experiential body, and, (4) the mundane body. The semiotic square provides a rich and varied representation of the motivations leading people to modify their bodies. Such motivations can be organized along two main criteria: (1) the nature of motivations (expressive versus hedonic); and, (2) the main recipient of the modifications (others/outer-directed versus oneself/inner-directed). Regardless of the nature and recipient of motivations, our data shows that most body-modified people do not undertake modifications for subversive or provocative reasons. Still, many are faced with an environment that reacts to their modifications with mixed feelings ranging from tolerance to incomprehension, from fear to disgust, and from rejection to discrimination. Our data reveals that critical reactions to body modifications are not only emotional and cultural, but are also meant to limit body-modified people’s freedom to alter their own body. Consequently, they disclose tensions about whom ultimately owns the body: the body-modified person, his relatives or society at large.

Notably, contested ownership is not limited to tensions arising between the body-modified person and people outside this subculture. First, our research has unveiled tensions arising at the personal level. Typically, modifications with which a body-modified person does no longer identify may create severe states of psychological tension. Second, contested ownership can also emerge within the body modification subculture, both with other body-modified people, as well as with one’s modifier (e.g., when a modifier rejects practicing a modification requested for motives considered futile or unworthy, or when the modification is deemed too risky or illegal). Our analysis furthermore reveals how contested body ownership is affected by facilitating and hindering factors on the individual, micro-social and institutional level. While local factors (e.g., cultural, legal, social) may account for variation in the findings, body modification appears as a largely transcultural market phenomenon (Berry et al. 2002), engendering states of ownership contestation at a global sphere.

REFERENCES


McCracken, Grant (1988), *The Long Interview*, SAGE.


