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## **Process and Meaning in 'Getting a Tattoo'**

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# Process and Meaning in 'Getting a Tattoo'

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of customer interactions and the development of client/provider relationships in the tattoo industry, a rapidly growing service that has seen an increase in demand for its 'products' over the last two decades and a cultural shift from the deviant to the mainstream. Through the use of a qualitative methodology the identified themes of 'information search', 'approval', 'interpersonal skills', 'trust building and mutual involvement' 'becoming a collector' and 'developing a sense of loyalty' are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades there has been increasing interest on the part of consumer researchers in the relationship between identity and consumption. This interest has instigated a wide range of investigations (Featherstone, 1992; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Douglas, 1996) many of which are predicated on the view that in contemporary society the identity of an individual is in part a construct of his or her consumption. This is due not only to the physical and non-physical objects a person can consume, but also the symbolic nature of these products (Schouten, 1991; Sarup, 1996). Linked to the creation of identity are issues concerning the body, and in particular the role of the embodied self (Featherstone, 2000; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Mauss 1979/1936). The relevance of this can be clearly seen in the growing literature on consumer behaviour relating to the body (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Falk, 1994; Featherstone, 2000; Featherstone *et al* 1991; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Sweetman, 2000; Synott, 1993) which includes a relatively recent focus on body modification such as cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991; Seebarsingh *et al*, 2001) and body art (Sanders, 1989, 1991; Goulding and Follett, 2002; Valliquette and Bamossy, 2001).

One popular form of body adornment which has a long and well documented history is that of tattooing. However it is fair to say that until recently tattooing has been regarded as socially unacceptable and excluded from mainstream fashion in western society. Nevertheless, as a consequence of celebrity role models such as Angelina Jolie and Johny Depp sporting tattoos, and shifts in fashion towards body adornment, including body piercing and tattooing, attitudes have changed, to such an extent that acquiring a tattoo is now seen as part of contemporary popular culture (DeMello, 2000; Camphausen, 2000; Mercury, 2000). Moreover the growing popularity of 'body art' has seen the development of a global multi-billion pound industry (Vale, 1999). In other words, the acquisition and meaning of tattooing has undergone a process of appropriation, first from the tribal, by sailors who used tattooing on particular parts of their bodies as a means of both spiritual and physical protection, and later by working class males (and some women), prisoners and gang members. As a result, tattooing came to be generally associated with criminal or deviant behaviour and carried with it a social stigma. Today, however, tattooing has not only been appropriated, but commodified as the choice of design, meaning, and quality, increases to meet accelerated demand for variety and variations on symbolic representations (Vale, 1999). Moreover, it is no longer possible to classify consumers of tattoos on the basis of age, gender, subcultural activity or class, as increas-

ing numbers from across the social spectrum are acquiring tattoos, all be it in varying quantities and for different reasons (Goulding and Follett, 2002; Armstrong and Murphy, 1997; Millner and Eichold, 2001). According to Irwin (2001) 7 million adults in the USA now have tattoos and they have now become so "thoroughly middle class that the only rebellious thing about them may be the decision not to get one" (p49). In effect there has been a cultural shift and a gradual destigmatization of deviance. Yet despite this, tattooing has received little attention from consumer researchers. Indeed there has only been one study, which specifically interpreted tattooing as a service industry (Sanders, 1985), despite the fact that a survey reported by Vale (1999) indicated that the tattoo sector was one of the fastest growing service industries in the US. Indeed tattooing may validly be classified as a service due to the fact that it has providers (the tattoo artists), clients (those who purchase the tattoo), and involves payment. However, the tattoo, the 'object' that is purchased is unique both in its concept and practice, and has very few comparisons, largely due to the permanency of the act. This brings into question the nature of the relationship, the experience, and importantly, the role of trust due to the very high risk and high degree of involvement surrounding the exchange. This paper explores the nature of this relationship and the factors influencing choice of tattooist, the nature of the experience, and the development of enduring relationships.

## METHODOLOGY

The main aims of the research were to gain insights into the nature of the tattoo experience from a range of tattooees, varying in their commitment to adorning their bodies with permanent markings. Rather than starting with a predefined framework the authors adopted an emergent methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that consisted of the collection of qualitative data in the form of informants stories. Some areas of behaviour are notoriously difficult to research from an 'outsider looking in' perspective and may consequently involve the researcher going 'native' in order to gain access to informants and collect credible data (see for example Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). In the case of tattooing and tattooees Vale (1999) addresses some of the problems faced by the researcher, notably gaining access, trust and dispelling suspicion surrounding the motives of the researcher. Consequently one off interviews were not deemed to be adequate for the purpose of researching the tattoo experience. In order to collect data, one of the authors who is himself very heavily tattooed embarked on a relationship building exercise with a number of key informants including tattoo artists and tattoo consumers, ranging from moderate to heavily tattooed. Tattooists provided client contacts and a total of fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted over a three month period with eight males and seven females ranging in age from 18-38. These were followed up with further meetings and discussions in order to capture the breadth of the experience. In addition to this, one of the researchers joined a discussion list dedicated to extreme body modification. In order to become a member, the applicant is required to write their story or history of becoming a 'tattooee' and submit a photograph of their tattoos. This vetting process is carried out to exclude the 'voyeur'. However, once accepted the new member is given access to all the stories,

pictures and email addresses of the list membership which allows him/her to enter into individual dialogues with informants. These stories helped to inform the analysis and supplemented the interview data. In terms of interpretation, all interviews were transcribed and subjected to a process of coding as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) which involved descriptive analysis through the use of 'open coding' through to the identification of patterns or concepts based on their relationship to each other. This stage involved the use of 'axial coding' which moved the interpretation beyond the level of description to the identification of interrelated themes.

## FINDINGS AND KEY THEMES

### The tattoo market

Loosely defined, the market for tattoos may be divided into three types, namely:

- 1) *Fashion and aesthetic tattooees*: These individuals usually acquire a tattoo for aesthetic purposes with little thought given to the symbolic or 'tribal' meaning. For example, a flower on the hip or shoulder which can be easily concealed. They are largely influenced by peer group referents and fashion trends and do not see themselves as part of a tattoo community.
- 2) *Committed but concealed tattooees*: This label covers the experienced tattooees who have embarked on a tattoo career, often covering their entire bodies from the neck down with permanent images. Often, each tattoo marks a particular event in the individual's life and may have personal as well as symbolic meaning. However, there is a reluctance to go 'all the way' by tattooing those parts that cannot be concealed, such as the hands and face. This allows the individual to engage in mainstream social and economic activities without incurring the prejudice and stigma that still accompanies extensive body modification (Pitts, 1999). On the other hand the extensive nature of the body art also allows acceptance into one or a number of the tattoo subcultures, such as 'modern primitives', that exist in Western society today.
- 3) *Committed collectors*: These individuals do not see themselves as having a tattoo, but 'being tattooed' (Vale, 1999). Being tattooed is part of an ongoing career of becoming a 'collector' of tattoos whereby the individual's life history is symbolically coded and written on the body. With regard to this group there are few boundaries or limitations to the placing of tattoos. Most cross the line and have facial and hand markings which cannot be concealed. Consequently, many take a conscious and voluntary decision to exclude themselves from the mainstream opting into an alternative subcultural grouping, making their living, often in the industry, and socializing with like-minded individuals. Whilst work from consume behaviour has tended to centre on the notion of regret (Valliquette and Bamossy, 2001), it appears to be those individuals who have impulsively purchased a tattoo and have taken it no further who are more likely to experience regret than those who have consciously developed a personal 'body career'. Nevertheless, longitudinal studies of life-passage may reveal different reactions. After all, having taken the decision to reject the mainstream, the permanency of the act does not easily allow re-entry.

However, having acknowledged that the tattoo market is diverse in terms of motivations and usage, there are a number of common features of the experience, which will of course vary depending upon which stage of the process the individual is at. These include the following:

### Information search

Whilst information search is a key aspect of many service encounters, the nature of tattooing probably provokes a greater degree of investigation, time and involvement. Tattoos are permanent. They are considered by most recipients to be works of art, to be created by 'artists' upon a canvass, the body. They are both public and private statements about the individual's identity, and, significantly, the act involves an often extended period of pain and potential risk of infection. Consequently information search is usually extensive, involving the internet and website analysis, personal inspection of premises and tattooists at work, levels of hygiene, a study of portfolios of previous tattoos carried out by the tattooist, and most importantly, discussions with past and existing clients. For example:

Mark aged 18: Having decided to have a tattoo: "The next step was to find an artist to do this for me. It wasn't too hard. My sister had a tattoo done at Addictive Ink and was very happy with the work and general environment of the shop. I'd heard nothing but good things about this place. My sister and I decided to go up and talk to the artist, look around the shop one evening. I went over a few fact sheets that had information on what sort of thing to look for in a shop. I'd read them many times before, but I wanted to be as informed as possible."

Sarah aged 20: "I searched online for what I should look for in a studio, and sure enough I found what I was looking for in seconds. I was told that the best thing to look for is an example of work carried out by the artist, and sure enough an example was right before me! My Mum had gotten a small flower design on her wrist that looked neat and tidy, so I asked where she got it (It was a Devil Bitch)."

First impressions are of vital importance in the decision to proceed and negative images can be an immediate deterrent:

James aged 26: "After what seemed an eternity I went to a tattoo studio in my area (I won't mention any names here). This place really put me off having a tattoo, it was so bad. The artists" didn't wear gloves, wash their hands, and were eating and smoking while tattooing. If that didn't make me run for the door, the attitude of one of the owners did!"

The tattooing industry has come a long way since the early days of back street 'scratchers' (unregulated, unlicensed tattooists operating from shabby premises or from home). It is now possible to find tattoo studios that resemble fashionable beauty parlours with highly skilled staff who have undergone extensive apprenticeships. Quality is a matter of expectation and tattooists have to compete for customers in the same way that any other service does.

### Approval

Schouten (1991) in his study of cosmetic surgery describes it as 'irreversible, expensive, painful, potentially dangerous, and, nevertheless, increasingly popular..' (p412). Words that could equally apply to the acquisition of a tattoo. Therefore having made a decision to go through with the tattoo, the next vital factor is that

of reassurance that the individual has made the right choice with regard to the tattooist and the parlour. The client needs to be supplied with information that will dispel any doubts that may be lingering as indicated by Rob:

Rob aged 30: "As far as the choices I made that evening I think that the place I went to was the most important. All the guys in the shop were more than helpful, answering any questions I had, joking around with me, and all in all making me feel real confident about choosing to go to Lucky 7. After finishing, all the guys that were in the shop came over to look at my back. I felt so proud when I heard how impressed they all were with the results. I mean these guys do tattoos for a living so the simple fact that they can still see a tattoo that impresses them meant a lot. Then Bob took me over to the other side of the room and took a couple of pictures of it to display in the shop"

Tattoos are individual, they are a supreme mode of self expression. However, they are also judged and interpreted by others both inside and outside the tattoo community. By the aficionados they will be deconstructed and read for symbols which are linked to individual and collective identity and may result in acceptance or rejection by a subcultural group. Maffesoli (1996) talks about the rise in what he terms 'neo-tribes' or the transitory group which is neither fixed or permanent, but involves a constant back and forth movement between tribe and the masses. These neo-tribes may be "effervescent, aesthetic, oriented toward the past or future; they have as their common characteristic on the one hand, a breaking with the commonly held wisdom and, on the other, an enhancing of the organic aspect of the social aggregation" (p96). Moreover, solidarity is expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form. According to Sanders (1988), fellow tattooees commonly recognise and acknowledge their shared experience, decorative tastes and relationship to conventional society. Tattooing has an affiliative impact in that it is routinely employed to demonstrate ones indelible connection to primary associates or groups whose members share special interests and activities (Sanders, 1988).

"Becoming tattooed is a highly social act. The decision to acquire a tattoo (and the image that is chosen), like most major consumer products is motivated by how the recipient defines him or herself. The tattoo becomes an item in the tattooee's personal 'identity kit', and in turn is used by those with whom the individual interacts to place him or her into a particular interactions-shaping social category"

Sanders, 1988, p405)

However, unlike the temporary neo-tribe discussed by Maffesoli, the wearing of a tattoo is not temporary, but permanent. It denotes a strong commitment to a particular group or lifestyle, and the larger or more prominent the tattoo, the greater the commitment.

**Interpersonal skills, trust building and mutual involvement**

Consequently, a least to begin with acquiring a tattoo is not a decision that is taken lightly and relies heavily on reassurance. The degree of reassurance rests largely on the extent of interpersonal skills displayed by the tattooist. Qualities such as honesty, previous experience and humour make the individual feel relaxed, important and create good customer relations. In effect the relationship is not unlike that of doctor/patient. The customer is literally putting his/her skin in their hands to be marked for posterity. As a result a strong sense of confidence needs to be built and expertise in terms of

artwork, range (for example skills in 'nu skool', 'old skool' 'tribal' decorations) and symbolic meaning demonstrated. For example:

Peter, aged 21: "Let me tell you that if you find a good tattoo artist with a sense of humour you are set. My nervousness melted away. Jeff was great. I just sat back and talked with him while he waited for his friends to bring dinner, I came a little early. He was one of the funniest guys I'd met. Right then I was comfortable. I looked through some flashes and photos of his work I was impressed by this. I looked around the room and saw all kinds of various awards and certifications. I knew this was a good one."

Tattoos are more than mere objects of consumption. They are extreme statements which are highly symbolic and riddled with meaning. Mcabbe (1997) discusses the symbolism inherent in tattoos and the current process of commodification and popularisation of body adornment. Accordingly, classic images such as the eagle, the snake, the anchor or the heart are deceptive in their directness and simplicity. Hidden behind these designs are years of technical and artistic experimentation that combine to make an art form. Indeed tattooing has always been closely related to the variety of the culture that surrounds it. However, the current explosion of interest in tattooing has pressed the art-form into a transitional period which challenges many time-tested values of the tattoo community. There is a process of gentrification occurring as new people from different walks of life become involved. Along with this, the aura of store bought has 'muscle' its way into what was once a personal hand made approach (Mcabbe, 1997). However, the personal approach remains a paramount part of the experience.

Linked closely to interpersonal skills is the issue of mutual involvement in the process. The extent to which the artist becomes involved gives the individual confidence in his/her abilities. It also demonstrates commitment on the part of the tattooist, which further helps to alleviate anxieties and allows for a more enjoyable experience.

Jenny aged 20: "I am overjoyed at my new ink, and cannot recommend Mike or Atomic Tattoo more highly. He is a phenomenal artist, who lends a huge amount of artistic consideration to his work. He's also very nice, funny, and not intimidating in the least. I felt that this tattoo was very much a collaboration between Mike and myself, rather than just a business transaction. He put a lot of himself into this tattoo, and I really appreciate that."

Jane aged 22: "The first time I realized that I was getting an awesome tattoo was when Bob (the artist) spent like half an hour just mentally planning out how he was going to do it. I was a little nervous when he said "I'm not going to lie to you, this is going to be a motherf...r" but like I said I had confidence in his abilities."

The tattooist needs to wholeheartedly demonstrate a high degree of self investment in the act, virtually to the same degree as the recipient. Their role goes beyond that of an artist, often, over time developing into educator, advisor and guru. Indeed some of the sample reported feelings akin to falling in love with their tattooist, so intimate is the relationship, whilst others felt the need to gain permission from their tattooist before they would speak to us. This of course brings into question the nature of the experience itself.

**Becoming a collector**

The act of getting tattooed is highly ritualistic (Irwin, 2001; Vale and Juno, 1989; Klesse, 1999). It involves planning, preparation, sometimes role transitions and a reconceptualisation of identity (Schrouten, 1991). Vail (1999) discusses the process of becoming a collector; a transformation which is physical, due to the alteration of the skin, psychological and sub-cultural. It also alters how the individual perceives his or her skin, and in turn how that skin is perceived by others. Being heavily tattooed still stands outside of conventional norms, and becoming a collector requires devotion to a lifestyle that might be considered marginal. "In short one must want to become a collector". Becoming a collector, or someone who is 'tattooed' as opposed to having a tattoo, is also an educational process, through which the individual learns about the appropriate designs, their meanings and their aesthetics on the individual's canvas.

Angie: "I have been into tattooing for as long as I can remember, I have always been interested in art, my background is in jewellery manufacture, I have always been arty and to me it was just another form of artwork. I had my first tattoo when I was twenty five, it was a tiny spiral, I have always been into spirals and Celtic artwork, I had always wanted one, I didn't want it normal, I wanted it more cartoon like, more free form. I got it when my boy friend at the time went to get one (a tattoo), and the tattooist had some spirals in his flash, but they were too perfect, too regular. I told him to \*\*\*\* it but I've never been too happy with it as it is too regular. At this point in time I have five tattoos in all, the spiral on my ankle, stars and flames on my abdomen, hot rod flames on my wrist, stars behind my ear, and the white tattoo on my back. I have lots of different stories that I tell people, some times if they are annoying me, I tell them it was done with needles dipped in bleach. Everything I have I have drawn myself, I like some tribal stuff but not the spikey stuff. I sketch what I want every time, I know what I want and I know what I like. But with the white one I really wanted that one to look like a Scarification, you know the whiteness of a scar, it was a bit of an experiment. I first got it done by the person I used to work for, he used to say that you couldn't do just white tattoos and when I saw a photo in a magazine I showed him and said to him I told you so! So I got him to do it, Winston has just gone over it again. ....: I have recently got into traditional body decoration, like the stars behind my ear and flames up my left arm, I wouldn't want pictures, traditional designs seem to flow with the body. The same with old skool designs, my views on them have developed over the last few years, I didn't use to see the appreciation in traditional tattoos before, but all of them are personal."

Joanne: "I was 17 when I got my first tattoo done it was not very good and it was done as part of a thing where every one in the crowd got one. Unfortunately I chose through price instead of quality, it was a small supposed Celtic design on my left arm. As you can imagine it is now covered up with a better design. This sort of put me off getting anything else till I was 25, this was a good thing because it allowed my taste to develop. Otherwise I would have got just the usual sort of crap that everyone gets instead of something that means something special to me and no-one else. I decided to go get another tattoo as I said when I was 25, I was working down south at the time and two of my male work colleagues had absolutely beautiful designs, the work was so intricate it was unbelievable. I asked

were they got it done and they told me. This tattooist was literally world class, he had at least 20 years experience, this was all evident when I went to his shop for the first time. I chose a design paid my money and then had to wait six weeks, this was how good he is there was and still is a four to six week waiting list to get a tattoo from him. I mean he isn't your usual 'mom and dad' or little itty bitty rose tattooist. After I got my first big one, on my right shoulder, I thought well I can take the pain, what about another, this was due to the fact that I came out of the tattooist with a huge grin on my face, but at the same time I wanted more, not just due to the fact that I actually enjoyed the tattoo (apart from the pain) but I felt that a large tattoo on one arm and a small one on the other would not balance out right. This way of thinking has continued to the present day where I am just going to get my lower left arm finished sometime in the near future, I have already planned how to finish the corresponding part of my right arm so that they are not lopsided. I have heard other people that are heavily tattooed feel an itch on an area that makes them feel where they need to get another tattoo. I have never felt like that but I do feel I know where *the next one is going to be placed.....perhaps it is subconscious?"*

This process of collecting and becoming a collector may be considered a form of what Van Gennep (1960) describes as a contagious rite of passage. This is based on the belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmittable. Within the sub-culture, tattoos mark the individual as a member, and the more extreme, symbolic or complicated the tattoo, the higher the position in the hierarchy. However, there is one aspect closely related to the tattoo ritual or rite of passage, and that is the actual experience of being tattooed which involves physical pain and reportedly, pleasure.

Joanne: "When I am getting a tattoo done it is a very strange experience as to begin with you have pain, this pain diminishes as the tattooing continues. Not just of that tattoo you are getting done but as you get tattooed more you get used to the experience and it hurts less...the pain diminishes as the tattooing progresses. As I said, for me personally it gets to about a third of the way through and I start to actually enjoy the process and by two thirds of the way through I'm usually high as a kite. I think this is partially to do with the excitement of getting tattooed; you are actually getting something that you really want that really means something to you as an individual, and can show off later; it is also partially to do with the amount of endorphins that are pumping round my body. I said that it gets less painful, well this also depends on where you get the tattoo done, some places are more painful than others; for example the tattoos on my shoulder blades were really sore. This is due I think to the differences in skin thickness. The body is very strange, when I got the inside of my left arm done I was getting tattooed about 3-4 inches away from my armpit yet it felt that I was actually getting tattooed there. It felt that real I had to have a look to see what the hell the tattooist was doing; the body does some strange things to you when you get tattooed."

**Developing a sense of loyalty**

Whilst there is an intensely physical side to the experience which some report as 'addictive' commitment to a particular tattooist rests largely on a number of personal skills and the ability to make the experience enjoyable. These social skills, high information, commitment and involvement, and the quality of the work

combine to create loyal customers who tend to remain loyal over a period of time. However, possibly more important, they are 'walking' advertisements for the tattooist.

Simon aged 18 "Gash is the most experienced tattoo artist in the area. He has several competitors in our city.....and ironically they are all on the same street, isn't that funny, but, Gash is the most talented out of all the artists, so I highly recommend him.....Gash is the only person I trust to do my tattoo's. So far he has done 11 of my 12 tattoos, and he has even sparked my interest in doing tattoos myself. It is hard to find such a talented artist in these times...but they are out there, you just have to look."

Tattooists rarely resort to traditional means of advertising and communication. Their clients do it for them to a large extent. Prospective tattoo collectors talk to experienced tattooees and word of mouth is by far the most potent weapon with regard to recommendations.

James aged 30: "After being tattooed at Heads, I now realise how clean and good the last place I went was. I don't plan on ever going to Heads again and told Ian not to get his done there. Why would anyone recommend somewhere that isn't even that great? Clearly they didn't research the studios to find the best one. So here's my advice to anyone thinking about getting a tattoo, visit shops and look at work the tattooist has already done, and make sure the place is clean and professional."

Claire aged 26: "I got my first tattoo 3 years ago at the same studio, he is a great artist known both for his work and personality. I would definitely recommend him to anyone. More seriously though, I trusted Shane's judgement as an artist."

Reliability is also central to the relationship and becomes even more important if the tattoo is to be completed over a period of time. Failure to meet expectations can result in negative associations and condemnations, as the following illustrates.

Martin aged 33: "Almost a year had past since I first started my devil girl and the convention where I had got it started was soon to be upon us again. I still wanted E to finish what he started so I rang his shop to confirm an appointment for the Sunday of the convention. Their receptionist told me that he was only doing "first come first serve" and to get hold of him when he gets there. And that's what I did. I confirmed, what I hoped was to be, the appointment to finish my arm.....Sitting in the lobby before the convention I see E strolling in with bag in tow, I approached him, asking if we would be able to finally finish my arm. He gives me a yes and we set up our appointment for Sunday. So there I am, actually sitting in the chair, early Sunday morning, ready to get this tattoo finished, unbelievable, huh? . As you might assume, we were not as chatty as in the first sitting. I just sat there, waiting for the finished piece of art. But then the unexpected, he has to STOP. He has an important appointment to show up to and we'll have to finish another time. I thought you have to be kidding. A huge upper arm piece, lined shaded, and coloured everywhere but the head, the wings, and the shoes. I was steaming and had to leave the convention for fear of my sometimes short fused temper taking over.

A few months down the road I had my artist Vinz finish what E had started. Doing a better job might I add. A few months

after that I heard from people who asked E about my arm and why he acted like he did. The explanation he gave was that I called and made appointments at his shop a couple of times and then No-showed. It's sad that he can't even tell the truth, I'd really like to know. Actually, the really sad truth is I now sit here with a beautiful tattoo, a top notch piece of art. And all I can think about when I look at it now is should I get it lasered to lighten it up first before I get it covered up. I love the look of great work, I can't wait to have much, much more, but, in the end, what is great work if it's an asshole who put it on you. This experience has not deterred me from seeking other talented artists. It has opened my eye's though. Get to know your tattoo artist, it may take a while, but you'll thank yourself for it.

Reliability and customer interactions are vitally important as they emphasises the personal relationships that are created and then reinforced by the actual act of tattooing. In this case the association with the tattoo and the artist is so strong that the client felt compelled to have it removed, despite the fact that he considered it a 'beautiful tattoo' and a 'top notch piece of art'. This highlights the importance of customer interactions which are often valued over and above the actual art work that is being performed. This relationship is built heavily on trust, and once formed tends to be of an enduring nature resulting in recommendations and repeat visits as the canvas is developed and worked upon.

## CONCLUSION

The rapid growth since the 1990s of tattoo culture which has brought a once perceived deviant activity into the mainstream, breaking down class, age and gender boundaries, raises some interesting questions for consumer researchers. To begin with, tattooing can now legitimately be classified as a service industry with clients and providers. However, the nature of this service is fairly unique due to the permanency of the act and the intimacy of the relationships involved. This relationship may also be of a long term and enduring nature and is dependent upon trust, confidence, liking, the ability to deliver an enjoyable experience and reliability. It is also closely linked to issues of identity, symbolic representation, and in some cases group membership. This paper has provided some exploratory factors which are largely mutually dependent, but would also benefit from a greater in-depth analysis in their own right. For example, the nature of exclusion and inclusion would make an interesting study and is open to a number of theoretical interrogations, as is the role of ritual in the process, particularly with regard to the changing nature of the contemporary 'consumer tribe'.

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