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# Consuming the Fashion Tattoo

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## ABSTRACT

From being considered a marginal and sometimes deviant behavior, the consumption of tattoos has become a mass consumer phenomenon. As tattoos have gained in popularity, it can be expected that the reasons for why people get tattoos have shifted as well. This paper explores consumers' motivations for getting a fashion tattoo and the meaning associated with its consumption. Through phenomenological interviews with fashion tattooees, the themes 'art/fashion', 'personalization and biographing', 'contextual representation of self', and 'meanings?' are related to existing consumption theory.

Having a tattoo has gradually become a mainstream consumption practice that can be found among people from all walks of life. Once associated with sailors or with biker culture and considered as a somewhat deviant behavior performed in opposition to the mainstream society, it has now transformed into a mass consumer phenomenon (DeMello 2000). In fact, it has been argued that to some extent tattoos are now considered so mainstream that they are almost passé (Sweetman 2000). These days, getting a tattoo has become more comparable to other consumption practices where people seek to beautify their bodies according to current fashion norms. Therefore, people are not necessarily getting a tattoo in order to express affiliation with a certain life style or a specific subculture. In this article we will examine consumers' motivations for getting a fashion tattoo and the meanings associated with its consumption. The emergence of tattooing as a mass consumer phenomenon has received scant attention in consumer research. The major contributions to research on tattoo consumption practices has been made from a subcultural/post-subcultural perspective with a focus on 'spectacular' consumers such as heavily tattooed women (Goulding and Follet 2002; Patterson and Elliot 2004) who in one way or another define themselves in opposition to mainstream society (DeMello 2000). Furthermore, there is a tendency in prior research to consider tattoo consumption as a socially disvalued activity (Sanders 1985) where tattooees are considered to constitute a subculture in its own right (Velliquette, Murray, and Creyer 1998). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the consumption practices underlying tattoo consumption as a mass phenomenon. That is, our empirical focus is primarily on consumers who have few tattoos and no intentions of having any more (all informants bar one had only a single tattoo). We thus focus on what Goulding et al. (2004) refer to as fashion and aesthetic tattoos, where the tattooees acquire the tattoo to beautify their bodies while paying less attention to the symbolic or 'tribal' meaning. According to Goulding et al., these tattooees are driven by peer group referents and fashion trends but unlike more heavily tattooed people, they do not define themselves as member of a tattoo sub-culture. Our findings are organized in a number of themes, some of which are different than from identified in other studies and others confirming previous research on tattoo consumption. We discuss our findings and previous research in relation to poststructuralist consumption theory, specifically Holt's (1995) typology of consumption practices in order to illuminate the variety of practices of this emerging consumption phenomenon.

## IDENTITY IN THE LATE MODERN AGE

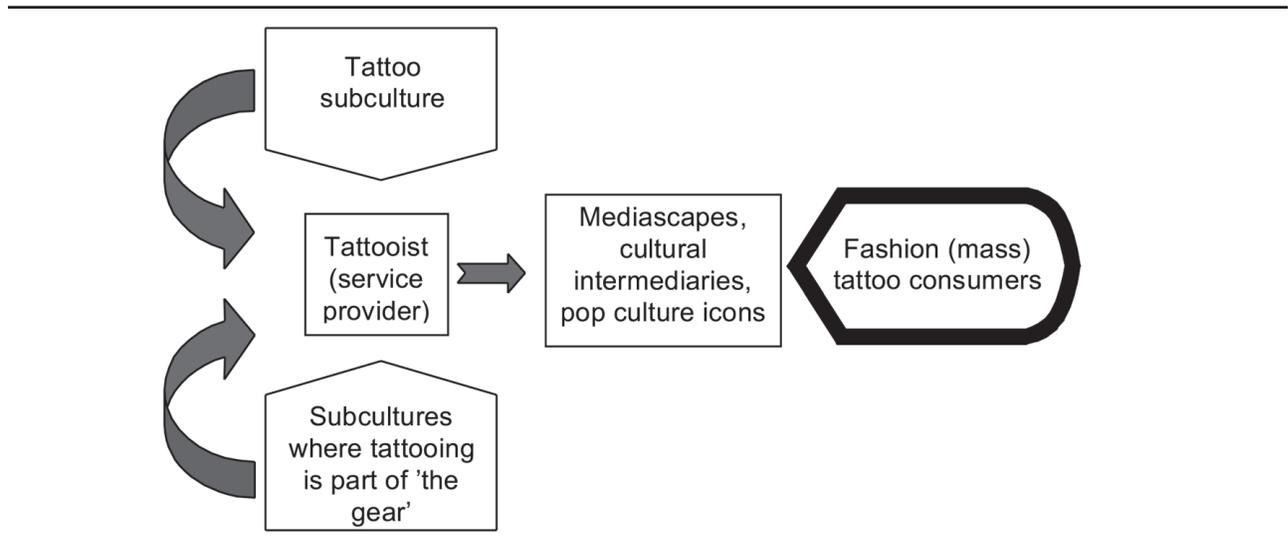
Tattoo consumption has emerged as a consumption phenomenon of the global cultural economy and one which has become a relatively conspicuous one (Sweetman 2000). Under conditions of late modernity, the body has come into focus and is considered as malleable and hence something that can be modified and improved. In this way, the body becomes an excellent site for expression of self identity, a phenomenon Baudrillard (1998) discusses as 'investing in the body'. The mass consumption of tattoos is one result of this increased interest in the body. In the late modern age it has been claimed that individual identities have become reflexive articulations of imagined biographies (Giddens 1991). As such, identities have become fluid in that there is a constant rearticulation taking place. Bauman (2001) goes as far as claiming that the identity strategy of today is less about committing oneself to one identity than it is about keeping possibilities for identity change open. It is somewhat paradoxical that while body expression on the one hand is part of a reflexive identity negotiation, it is characterized on the other hand by a higher degree of permanence and hence something that closes off the possibilities for identity change. One way to explain this possible paradox, however, is that body expressions are attempts to anchor self-identity in order to obtain some stability in contemporary consumer culture (Sweetman 2000).

The phenomenon of tattoo consumption illustrates the postmodern breakdown of the mind-body dualism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) by pointing to the stylization of the body as an integral part in the construction of self-narratives. As body modifications—such as tattoos—feature in popular representations (such as ads, movies, music videos) and among both generalized and immediate Others' of consumers, the body increasingly becomes represented as an integral part of self construction. The body hence achieves new meanings and a new status which consumers learn through socialization. We interpret this to be much in line with the dialogical model of fashion outlined by Thompson and Haytko . The malleability, however, of the body we interpret as being part of a postmodern cultural ideology of the body in which the bodies become "living records of [...] life histories and consumption habits" (Thompson and Hirschman 1995, p. 151).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

In order to identify tattoo consumption practices, we conducted interviews with fashion tattooees. The purpose of the interviews was two-fold. First of all to investigate how imagery was categorized and typologized by consumers—i.e. what kind of symbols would be appropriate for tattooing—including the symbolism in the tattoo motifs chosen by our informants. Secondly, to look at the practice and experience of acquiring the tattoo. Our overall understanding of the tattoo market was to get beyond a purely sub-cultural understanding and more towards a market system understanding. Indeed, this perspective includes the symbolic meanings inherent in the tattoo subculture, but we consider this as an influencing factor rather than being the lens through which the field is examined. Our understanding is summarized in Figure 1. Phenomenological interviews were carried out with 14 fashion tattooees who do not subscribe to membership of a subculture as motivation

**FIGURE 1**  
Overview of the tattoo system



for acquiring their tattoo. In addition, we conducted interviews with two tattoo artists, in order to get an understanding of the service providers' interpretation of the popularization of tattooing (see also Bengtsson, Östberg and Kjeldgaard (forthcoming)).

### FINDINGS

In the following we discuss our research findings in terms of four overall themes which constituted the discourse on tattoo consumption among our informants. First we discuss how tattooees categorize imagery in terms of appropriateness for tattooing, evoking an art/fashion dichotomy. Secondly, we discuss the theme of personalization of imagery and meaning, thirdly how tattoos are used for contextual representations of self, and fourthly the (lack of) meaning of tattoo symbols.

#### Art or fashion

Many tattoo artists consider tattooing as a form of art and in that respect define themselves as artists. This is a shift in discourse compared to the time when tattooing were mostly for bikers and other people from the low end of the society (DeMello 1995). Today, the tattoo industry is increasingly characterized by educated professional tattooists that provide fine art designs, and this has given the tattoo subculture legitimacy within the art world (Sanders 1989, p. 108). One of the tattoo artists we interviewed expressed his ideas about tattoos as art in the following way:

"In their [people not tattooed] eyes, I know they think I look terrible. Because if you have no knowledge about the art—just like a man looking at an abstract painting and thinks it looks a mess. But that's because he hasn't learned to look at it properly. I think it's often that way with tattoos as well." (male tattoo artist)

On the other hand, when it comes to fashion tattooees the art discourse seems to be less obvious. Therefore, a dichotomy between art and fashion is constructed as fashion tattooees have to define their tattoos in opposition to the 'mainstream' discourse among tattooist who belong to the tattoo subculture. Consider this

tattooee's reflections about the half-moon she has tattooed on her foot as a sign to mark her nine month world tour with a gymnastics team.

"I think that those who have many tattoos may look at it as an art form just like other kinds of art—paintings and stuff. And they like to adorn their body with that. Uh ... it's not like that when you just have a single one done. Then you don't think art. A half-moon—where's the art in that? [...] it's just another form of adornment, I mean just like jewelry and clothes and earrings for example." (female, aged 24)

The tattooist and the tattooee both relate to the art discourse but their remarks reflect different practices and identity positions in relation to the categorization. However, they nevertheless acknowledge each others' positions in the tattoo marketing system (the informant above make references to the tattoo / body modification subculture, other informants make references to other subcultures where tattoos are part of the gear). Among the fashion tattooees there is a reflexive understanding of the tattoo as being non-art and non-subcultural. Since none of the consumers we interviewed were heavily tattooed, they would primarily rely on such a fashion/adornment discourse rather than the artistic discourse. The notable exception, however, are the consumers who construct (literally) their own tattoos. This practice of 'crafting' will be elaborated on below.

#### Personalization and biographing

We found, as with many other consumption objects, that consumers sought to personalize their tattoo consumption (cf. McCracken 1986). One aspect of personalization is the practice of crafting one's own motif, rather than choosing a pre-made design from the flash cards in the tattoo studio or more broadly from popular culture. One key way of making a tattoo personal, is to link the imagery to the individual biography. One of the tattooees interviewed had a tattoo that was a combination of the sign of his military regiment's coat of arms and a part from the logo of the university he was attending (cf. Sanders 1988) (Figure 2):

**FIGURE 2**  
Crafting a tattoo



**FIGURE 3**  
Tattoo motif from popular culture



“Well basically it is my coat of arms. From Jutland’s dragon regiment up in Holstebro. Then I have removed the escutcheon of King Christian V, the founder of our regiment, and put the apples of the University of Southern Denmark there instead. So I think that was a bit funny. I have always known that I would have a tattoo. But I have never known what it would be. But in this way it became something that is reflecting who I am as a person, but also something that is unique.” (male, aged 29)

To this informant the tattoo becomes a way of making aspects of his biography more manifest by marking his body with two readily available images in combination. The tattoo is more personal, both because of the close link he has to the two institutions in question, but also by the fact that he is combining two symbols. The link to biography in this case consists in marking and fixing specific life events. Another aspect of incorporating the tattoo into the personal biography is when the act of getting the tattoo in itself becomes a significant life event and hence part of the story of the self. The quote below illustrates how the specific life time period in

which the informants had her tattoo is evoked more generally in terms of identity:

“Well, to me it is just like a memory both of the year I spent in Switzerland, but also as a memory about how I once was. Because, that Jane who was in Switzerland is definitely not the kind of person I am today. In fact, I was much more wild and crazy. Very different from today.” (female, aged 29)

Another aspect of personalization concerns the meaning of the image and the way tattooees claim possessiveness over the meaning and make it a natural extension of their self (Belk 1988). The following informant had a tattoo of the death metal band Sepultura on his calf since he had always been fond of the band (Figure 2).

“The tattoo has become mine. And even if other people don’t know its meaning, I will still know myself what the tattoo means. I know what it means to me from Sepultura’s part [i.e. what Sepultura intends]. And they have already changed; the

logotype has a new background which happened after they changed their lead singer. So it's [tattoo] already different from Sepultura." (male, aged 20)

The informant is utilizing the logotype of a rock band in order to make his body unique. However, we have been told by other tattoo consumers (not part of the study) that having this band's logo on the calf is popular among fans of the band in particular and among metal fans more generally. Sepultura is a kind of high cultural capital metal band very much concerned with political issues such as the deforestation of the Amazon and of the right of land to native populations—hence there is more than merely a manifestation of music taste in having the tattoo. Our informant also tells us that he is a 'socialist'—hence the tattoo enters into this overall and relatively coherent story of his self.

### Contextual representation of self

An important matter to decide upon for tattooees is where to place the tattoo on the body. Prior research has found that most male tattooees place their tattoos in a place where it can be displayed in public, typically on the arm or on the hand. Female tattooees on the other hand tend to choose a place where only people with whom they are intimate can see the tattoo (Sanders 1988). These differences between men and women regarding placement of tattoos are furthermore confirmed by Watson (1998). For the fashion tattooees, however, it appears to be important that the tattoo can be hidden with clothes in order to be able to act like a 'normal' person to people who might have a negative idea about tattoos.

"My tattoo is placed so that I can always cover it if I need. If one day I will be a manager for a marketing department, then I want to be able to walk with a short-sleeved shirt and still not show my tattoo. Also because I don't think it looks nice to have tattoos all over the arms or on the back of the head [...]. It can be offensive to some people." (male, aged 20)

"If I would sit in a nice church or some other place down south or whatever, then it would be smart to be able to cover it with a t-shirt or a long-sleeved sweater, so that you almost don't need to wear gloves or whatever. Well...I like that it is one that you don't see no matter what [you wear]." (male, aged 25)

These informants evoke a cultural understanding of the deviant meaning of tattoos still present despite the popularity of tattooing. They do not reject or resist this cultural order but actually subscribe to it and therefore adopt a more contextual representation of their selves. We believe this a fundamental difference from the findings reported by for example Goulding and Follett (2002) where informants interpret themselves as being in opposition to the mainstream and therefore achieves self-identity by being in opposition and being in the minority. The informants in our study consider themselves as part of mainstream culture and therefore acknowledge the social sanctioning that might occur. The positioning of the tattoo on the body in places that can easily be hidden is therefore not only a matter of the tattoo being intimate but is also instrumental in relation to self expression. The reflexivity about tattoo placement, and the interpretation of its significance is an example of consuming as classification. However, it is classification performed from a different perspective compared with consumers who define themselves as members of a sub-culture.

### Meanings?

One fundamental question related to tattooing concerns the meaning of the imagery. For many fashion tattooees, however,

having a tattoo is primarily a matter of adornment of the body. As one of our informant noted earlier, the actual choice of symbol is more an unarticulated expression of personal aesthetic preference rather than searching for specific symbols which are expressive of, or shared with, perceived personal traits. The following quote illustrates how the meaning of the tattoo is subordinate to its aesthetic qualities.

R: "It's a kind of band around the arm. You can see it if you like? It's just very ordinary.

I: Ok ... it's a tribal...

R: Yes, there is no deeper meaning in it, not that I know of. It was just a motif that I liked.

I: How important was the motif for you?

R: Nothing other than it had to be nice. Other than that it's not important." (male, aged 28)

The informant does not attempt to justify the choice of motif in terms of elaborate explanations of the symbolism of his tattoo. We consider this as an expression of the role the tattoo plays in a general bodily beautification also noted by Goulding and Follett (2002). The lack in interest in the motif's symbolism is furthermore reported by Sanders' (1988) tattooee informants who generally made reference to aesthetic criteria.

## TATTOOS AND CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

In the following we relate our findings as well as previous research to Holt's (1995) typology of consumption practices: consuming as integration, experience, classification, and play. Holt's (1995) classification of consumption practices is based on the principle that consumption objects are consumed by different groups of consumers in a variety of ways. In outlining a typology of consumption practices, Holt identifies four metaphors that can explain various forms of consumption. First, consumption can be categorized by examining the structure underlying the action, i.e. whether consuming primarily is focused on the object per se or on interactions with other people where the object becomes the important resource. Second, the purpose of consumption can be distinguished as whether or not the act is an end in itself or a means to some other end. By combining these two dimensions, the four metaphors 'consuming as experience', 'consuming as play', 'consuming as integration', and 'consuming as classification' can be identified.

### Consuming as Integration: Globalization of Common Individual Differences

In the realm of individual identity articulation we are witnessing a kind of hyper differentiation in which the market system is constructing new stages on which to express identity. Tattooing can be viewed as such an extension of the areas in which identity can be expressed. We compare this to Wilk's (1995) notion of structures of common difference. Wilk argues that in a globalized world, being able to express cultural difference is valorized in the global cultural economy. This does not mean that a homogenization is not taking place. However, what are homogenizing are the stages at which we can express our difference. Wilk (ibid.) highlights areas such as the national flag, food culture, and in the case of his study of Belize, beauty pageants. Essentially, he argues that in the global cultural economy you can (and are indeed encouraged to) express difference. These differences however, are more easily recognized by the Other if it occurs through similar institutions. The global structures therefore are arenas through which cultures can express difference.

Although we acknowledge the danger inherent in transferring a macro-sociological/anthropological conceptual framework of globalization to the individual level, we nevertheless find the concept intriguing in explaining the emergence of the fashion tattoo. The fashion tattoo—and other forms of body modification—which primarily is performed to beautify the body could be considered as a new structure through which to articulate individual difference. The very fact that the tattoo practice has become a mass phenomenon indicates that it has been instituted as a commonly acknowledged means through which to express identity—an addition to other instituted structures of identity expression such as cars, houses, clothing, and grooming. The purpose of utilizing the structure, and indeed which kind of imagery to fill it with, can have a variety of motivations which are primarily rooted in the discourse. The practice of tattooing can vary from identity discourses that revolve around the logic of expressing individual authenticity to one which revolves around a logic of collective belonging to global consumer culture (Kjeldgaard 2003). Nevertheless tattooing is a commonly acknowledged means through which to express identity. When tattoos are consumed for these reasons, we interpret this as an account of consuming as integration.

### **Consuming as Experience: Meanings?**

As we discussed in the data analysis, the imagery chosen by tattooees seems to lack in signification in many cases. There is simply no signified attached to the signs written on the bodies. We interpret this as a matter of consuming as experience since the act of getting the tattoo is an end in itself and where the individual consumer is primarily engaged with the object. This appears to be a common characteristic among fashion tattooees and it fits well with theorists who suggest that postmodern fashion does not refer to anything but itself (Sweetman 2000). The meaning, as we interpret the findings, resides in the very act of getting the tattoo—an urge to participate in this newfound structure of utilizing the body in a radical way (yet safe due to the mass aspect) for the construction of style. The radicalness emerges in the informants' elaborate narratives of having the tattoo made—the pain and the patience involved (Sanders 1989; Sweetman 2000). The signified of the tattoo in the cases of our informants therefore resides in the experience itself, one which implies danger and transgression. In a sense, all tattoos refer to the experience of transgression. The transgression involves two things. The historical connection to 'dangerous' and 'exotic' subcultures makes the act of tattooing a transgression. The other transgression involves the act of permanently altering one's body. The nature of the newly instituted practice of tattooing is hence one of transgression. The fashion tattoo, however, means that it involves taking a risk without going all the way. Many informants expressed anxiety about 'getting hooked' and suddenly wanting to have more tattoos made which they did not find desirable (cf. Vail 1999).

### **Consuming as Classification: The Tattoo Fashion**

Tattoos have traditionally been considered as anti-fashion among cultural studies theorists due to its inscription in spectacular and oftentimes deviant subcultures in which only artisan capitalist market system operate (Hebdige 1979). It is indeed somewhat paradoxical, however, to discuss tattoos in terms of fashion since any permanent body modification is as much anti-fashion as it gets (Sweetman 2000). On the other hand, Craik (1994) argues that improved techniques of tattoo removal have alleviated some of the stigma associated with tattooing and hence paved the way for tattooing to become high fashion. But for heavily tattooed people whose integrating practices are directed towards achieving individuality through what they themselves acknowledge as deviant

behavior, it is still likely that tattooing is considered as anti-fashion, non-mainstream and in opposition to the 'normal' society. This cultural meaning of the tattoo is still part of practice for some of our fashion tattooees, and hence it constitutes a classifying practice in which the structure of action is interpersonal and the object engagement is instrumental. However, they work strategically with this cultural classification system in that they have a contextual strategy for self-representation. As was noted earlier, the tattoo is not consumed for its deviant qualities—indeed our informants seem to accept the mainstream judgment of the tattoo—but for personal beautification. They work with and hence reproduce existing classificatory systems through their contextual self-representations. However, with the development of the popular fashion tattoo, new ways of classification also take place, as when some of our informants discuss tattoos in an art/fashion classificatory system.

As opposed to other types of adornment—whether anti-fashion or fashion—the tattoo, however, lacks the fundamental quality of interchangeability due to its permanency. Hence, the consumer is stuck with the choice of imagery which some consumers also seem to be aware of (choosing personalized motifs). However, the difference remains that the consumer is stuck with his/her final consumption and fashion choice and hence become a 'sign of the time'. Fashion obsolescence, however, not only generates the need to craft individual tattoos but also for informants to reflexively personalize the meaning of the tattoo. There is, perhaps, a more intense incorporation of the tattoo into one's self-definition than with many other consumer objects, partly because the image has become embodied, but also because the image may become out of fashion or indeed redesigned by the organization behind (cf. the example of the Sepultura logo).

### **Consuming as Play**

In our study we did not come across instances of the practice of play—except when tattoos themselves become part of sociality. Heavily tattooed people who define themselves as members of the tattoo subculture generally feel an immediate social bond to other people with tattoos. Whether this constitutes the practice of play is arguable. However, institutionalized events such as tattoo and body modification conventions exhibit exactly the combination of autotelic object involvement and interpersonal structures of action. The subculture of body modification is also to some extent about the practice of play as it is about integration.

## **DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH**

By relating consumers' motivations and practices for acquiring a fashion tattoo to the typology of consumption practices we can conclude that prior research on tattoo consumption has primarily been concerned with consuming as 'classification'. This study on the other hand incorporates the perspectives of consuming as 'experience' and 'integration'. Furthermore, we also find that tattoo consumption is a practice of classification. However, it is a different type of classification since the classifiers (tattooees) do not themselves consider their tattoo consumption as a sign of sub-cultural affiliation. The study reported in this paper positions itself in consumer research in relation to a number of areas. First of all, it studies the consumption of tattooing in a fashion perspective and as a mass phenomenon rather than as a marginal, sub-cultural and socially disvalued activity (cf. Patterson and Elliot 2004; Sanders 1988; Velliquette and Murray 1999). The tattooees interviewed for this study are not highly involved tattoo consumers but are rather using this kind of body modification as a supplementary form of adornment and for this reason as a supplementary aspect of identity expression. We believe that our results point to other aspects of

tattoo consumption than the approaches mentioned before which have the tattoos themselves as a focus. Our study therefore seeks to situate the consumption of tattooing in the wider life world of consumers and thus provides insights into other practices of tattoo consumption (Holt 1995; Holt 1997). By relating fashion tattooees' motivations for getting a tattoo, and the meanings associated with it, to existing consumption theory, we provide an additional understanding for the various reasons why people partake in this consumption.

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