

Consumption of tattoos

Getting, Having and Being

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Abstract

In recent years the scope of consumption studies has expanded and increasingly includes studies of more 'untraditional' consumption acts. However, few studies have looked at the consumption of tattoos. Tattoos are interesting in a consumption context since they are, literally, very durable 'products' difficult to 'dispose' of. In the paper, we account for the results of a qualitative study of tattoos as consumption that both has tribal elements and is highly intertwined with identity construction. A key finding is that there seems to be major differences between people with only one, or a few, tattoos and heavily tattooed people. To the first group, the decision to get a tattoo as well as the design of the tattoo are crucial, and more often than not the tattoo qualifies as a signifier of a special event, occasion or relation to significant others. To the other group the tattoo itself is of lesser importance as this group enacts being heavily tattooed as tribal and seems more interested in (or even addicted to) the act of actually getting tattooed than in having a tattoo.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

In their section on tattoos, Wikipedia boldly claims that “during the latter decades of the 20th century tattooing became a popular social practice worldwide, and many, if not most, young people today either have aspirations to have a tattoo somewhere on their body or already have one or more”. It seems that tattoos are increasingly used by consumers in order to both define and display who they are. From a consumer behavior perspective, tattoos are interesting as both ‘acquisition’ and ‘disposal’ differ from consumption of other products. Firstly, ‘acquisition’ is painful and entails that the consumer seeks out ‘stores’ (tattoo parlors) that are likely to be unknown and potentially ‘dangerous’ territories. Secondly, ‘disposing’ of a tattoo is both painful and more complicated than disposal of other products. Therefore, consumption of tattoos may be a particular interesting topic insofar we wish to better understand why people engage in various acts of consumption and how this relates to identity creation. Pitts (2003) argues that by means of body modification (including tattooing), the body becomes a space for exploring identity; experiencing pleasure and pain; and establishing bonds with others. In the same vein, Featherstone (1982) argues that in contemporary consumer culture, ‘the outer body’ is increasingly seen as a vehicle for managing appearances and impressions, thus making the body a canvas on which the consumer can inscribe his/her values and identity. Following Featherstone’s lead, in this article we predominantly relate to ‘the outer body’ and tattooing as an act of consumption and do not address more corporeal issues of ‘the body’.

Jenkins (2006) argues that identity is a construction dependent on interaction between oneself and others whereas Giddens (1991) argues that identity also has an internal dimension. Identity can thus be viewed in two complementary perspectives: Personal identity and social identity. In relation to social identity, the individual classifies objects or individuals and associates itself with or relates to something or someone (Jenkins 2006). Identity must thus be confirmed in social contexts, which means that identity is constructed through processes of identification and categorization. Giddens (1991) believes that the individual is reflective and critical to the surroundings (Kaspersen, 2001). In relation to such reflectiveness, Giddens (1991) uses the term self-identity and argues that the individual actively creates identity. Although Giddens (1991) and Jenkins (2006) view identity somewhat differently, both approaches may

contribute to increasing our understanding of how tattoos affect people's identity. As a result, relations between tattoos and internal *and* external identity constitute part of our interview guides.

The term stigma refers to signs inflicted on a person and marking his status. Goffman (2010) argues that stigmatization arises from social interactions among individuals and helps society identify individuals, whose traits and behaviors differ from the 'normal'. Those deviant from the 'normal' are considered to be stigmatized and are therefore often treated differently (Goffman, 2010). Jenkins (2006), on the other hand, does not *per se* define stigma as negative as he believes stigma is a process, which all people go through in order to find out who they are and what their 'place' in society is. Stigma is an important term relating to how the individual identifies both self and others (Jenkins, 2006). Stigmatization can be negative as well as positive and as tattoos certainly seem to qualify as (self-inflicted) stigma it seems interesting to dig into interviewees' enactment of stigmatization.

Another interesting concept in regard to consumption of tattoos is tribalism. Tribes are groups of people, who share a mutual passion - forming the basis for sub-cultures (Barker, 2008). Tribes have certain consumption patterns and tribal communities influence individuals' behavior (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). One thing all people have in common is the differences from others (Jenkins, 2006) and people must have something in common before they can be called members of a specific group or a category. However, what they have in common cannot be recognized before their differences are also recognized and therefore, where there is inclusion, there must also be exclusion. Categorization is a routinized and practical way for individuals to construct meaning as it helps the individual to identify people by placing them in different categories and thereby create an illusion that we know what we can expect from people (Jenkins 2006). In relation to the study of tattoos, it seems interesting to look at whether all tattooed people are a part of the 'same' group or whether they enact themselves as members of different groups and categories. Tribes take Jenkins' (2006) notion of groups and categories one step further, and it seems relevant to look at communities as well as tribalism. It is not unusual for consumers to be members of several different tribes at the same time and each tribe has its own way of conveying signs with which their members identify (Cova & Cova 2002). Cova and Cova (2002) have identified four different roles a

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tribal member can adopt (i.e. sympathizer, participant, devotee and practitioner). According to Mitchell & Imrie (2009, p. 46) participants are people, who play an active role and who “socialize’ with the tribe, in physical and virtual spaces”. Devotees are people, who have a long-standing passion, knowledge and involvement with the tribe, but who may not be active frequently and finally, practitioners are people, who in some way are ‘employed’ within the area that the tribe’s devotion centralizes around – e.g. tattooists. These different roles within tribes is the last of the theoretical building blocks that guide the interviews and analysis hereof, which we return to after having introduced the methodological grounding of the project.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research that seeks to develop an understanding of how consumers define themselves through tattoos. Our relativist ontological position implies that there is no ‘one’ truth and our subjectivist epistemology makes us see understanding as a process created through interaction between researchers and interviewees (Guba, 1990). Furthermore, we define the individual as a reflective being, who is able to reflect on both others’ and his or her own actions and intentions. Interviewees contribute with their unique views and stories on tattoos and consequently the project does not seek to investigate the whole population of tattooed people, but instead the key intention is to understand and interpret the interviewees’ experiences in relation to the consumption of tattoos. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008, p. 1) argue that the qualitative research interview “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world” and in order to understand and unfold the interviewees’ points of views and the meanings of their experiences, we applied different qualitative approaches; i.e. observations, expert interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews.

As for the observations, they provided a preliminary understanding of tattoos and tattooing. Amongst other things, these observations included visiting a tattoo convention, tattoo parlors and on-line tattoo communities. As for the three expert interviews, these were interviews with tattoo artists and the key purpose of these interviews was to gain a preliminary understanding of the world of tattooing and to prepare the researchers for the subsequent semi-structured and focus group interviews.

The purpose of the two focus groups was to gain a consumer perspective on the topic. Before starting the interviews, the interviewees were informed what the interviews were about. Introductory questions were asked to get to know the interviewees a bit better and to make them feel comfortable. In this part of the interviews we got to know the interviewees' age, occupation, number of tattoos, etc. Then, the focus group was structured according to questions pertaining to the themes identity (how the interviewee views his or her own tattoos, individual and social identity, etc.), the interviewee's experiences regarding tattoos (Goffman, 2010 and Jenkins, 2006) and tribal signs and roles (Jenkins, 2006, Cova & Cova, 2002, Mitchell and Imries, 2009).

The key source of data is 15 in-depth interviews conducted as conversations between people concerning a specific topic. In these interviews the key topics were identity and consumption in relation to tattoos and understandings were continuously constructed and reconstructed through dialog (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The objective of the semi-structured interviews was to investigate why people get/have tattoos, if and possibly how they congregate in tribes and communities and not least how this influences their self-conception and identity.

Interviewees are rather young (18 to 30 years). This age range was chosen because we anticipated that this period of life relates to 'defining who you are' and therefore very much to identity formation. The interviewees are quite diverse in many ways, e.g. gender, social status, profession and nationality. As for the key source of data (i.e. the 15 in-depth interviews), 11 of the interviewees were Danes and four were from Slovakia, seven were women and eight were men. The youngest interviewee is in his last year in high school and the oldest interviewees are educated teachers; one interviewee manages a toy store and is the father of a 3 year old daughter. However, the other interviewees have no children. A key finding is that interviewees with only one, or a few, tattoos differ profoundly from the heavily tattooed interviewees and in the following sections, we discuss these differences.

Identity

To interviewees with many tattoos, tattoos do not seem to have as much 'personal value' as tattoos have for the interviewees with only a few or one tattoo. Furthermore, people with only few tattoos are

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more aware of what the tattoo means to them and in most cases the tattoo symbolizes something personal; i.e. a reminder of a specific event or personal value or an image which reminds them of loved ones. One example is Jonathan [all names changed by the researchers], who is 18 years old and has two tattoos, both of which are very important to him. His first tattoo is a 'heartagram' from a heavy metal band, which he has been a fan of since he was 13 years old. He believes that the band has had a major impact on his personality and the tattoo is to honor that he 'found himself' through listening to the band's music and it reminds him who he wants to be. His second tattoo is the one that he values the most. It is an image of an origami bird, which is a tribute to his uncle, who died four years ago. Jonathan tells about this tattoo:

So I was at my grandmother's house and I found this bird that my uncle had folded, like six months before he died and my grandmother is very much against tattoos, but I had told her that I wanted the tattoo, and she said that if I had to get a tattoo with something with [his uncle], she would say that it had to be that, because he folded a lot of those (...) and he was very good at folding paper into things. And I thought to myself, yes that would be a pretty tattoo and a pretty memory

Jonathan's story about the origami bird very much resembles the stories that other interviewees with only one or a few tattoos told. As for the heavily tattooed interviewees, they are very passionate about getting tattooed, but they do not emphasize the 'greater meaning' of the individual tattoos as much. They focus more on tattoos as integral parts of their 'bricolage' of tattoos and on getting more tattoos. Nevertheless, these interviewees also have some tattoos with personal value symbolizing beloved ones. For example, Eric has a big eagle and a banner with the saying 'far' ['father' in Danish] and Mathew has tattoos that symbolize his brother and sister. But basically, the heavily tattooed interviewees argue that they get tattoos because it 'looks good' and they see the total bricolage as body decoration. Pete, who is the most tattooed interviewee, has tattoos on his leg, both arms, his entire back and almost all of his stomach and chest and argues that individual tattoos do not have to have 'larger' meanings; they are body art. When asking Pete if his

tattoos say something about him as a person he said: "... I have one on my leg with [a football club], which obviously means something, because I care a lot about it. But the rest is really just something where I found some inspiration and thought it might look good". As exemplified by Pete and Jonathan, interviewees with few tattoos are more concerned with the meaning of their individual tattoos and what they get tattooed than people with many tattoos. This tendency is confirmed by one of the tattoo artists as follows:

Generally people come in and would like to get a very small tattoo, which does not really make any sense, but is really important to them. But when people come in and want to have their whole arm tattooed, they usually say; I want, I want a Japanese arm, there must be color and there must be a fish and then the rest is up to you. That is very typical!

It seems that people are much more aware of what their first tattoo(s) symbolizes than their following tattoos. Furthermore, interviewees with only one or a few tattoos have very personal tattoos. For example, Charlie has a tattoo that symbolizes his engagement to his girlfriend, Pete has a tattoo which reminds him of the way he should live his life and Jonathan has his uncle's origami bird on his arm. On the other hand, when they get an additional tattoo, the heavily tattooed interviewees do not take that much interest in that specific tattoo. Giddens (1991) theory on individual and social identity might explain why the interviewees with few tattoos have stronger feelings and attachments to their tattoos and we return to this issue in the last section of the paper.

Why did people start getting tattoos?

Most of the interviewees were very interested in tattoos for years before they got their first tattoo, thus being 'sympathizers' in Cova and Cova's (2002) words. Furthermore, some of the heavily tattooed interviewees were drawn by tattoos from an early age. For example, one of the tattoo artists tells how he started drawing 'tribals' in the 2nd grade and that he got his first tattoo at the age of 17 (by an unlicensed tattoo artist on a boat in the North Sea). In the same vein, 26 year old Eric explains how his fascination of tattoos started:

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I always knew that I would like to have tattoos. Since I was ten; I have been saying that I wanted tattoos. Because my uncle and dad are very tattooed and I have always been very fascinated by it. [...] Tattoos never scared me because my dad reads a lot of bike magazines where everyone had tattoos and again my family is very tattooed (...) I have always found it fascinating that you can create art that way.

From an early age, Eric was influenced by his father's and his uncle's consumption of tattoos. He has also been affected by his father's biker magazines that made him see lots of pictures of tattooed people. When Eric was asked why he got his first tattoo he said: "At that time I didn't think that I would get as many tattoos as I have today. I'll surely have more, but back then I got tattooed because I thought it was cool, even though, at the time, it was not fashionable to get tattooed". Eric got his first tattoos because he thought that it was 'cool'; not because it was fashionable. It seems that Eric's upbringing and his family's consumption of tattoos had a major influence on him and it seems that the part of Eric's identity that relates to tattoos was created in the interaction with his family and their approach to tattooed people, which he has embraced and been influenced by. Whereas tattoos were part of Eric's childhood, other interviewees tell how they got interested in tattoos although they did not know any tattooed people. For example, Pete has been very fond of tattoos from an early age and got his first tattoo when he was 16. His decision to get his first tattoos was very different from Eric's, since he did not have any family or friends with tattoos. When talking to Pete about why he wanted to get tattooed, he said "it was something that I had thought of for quite some years, and I told my parents when I was 15 that I was ready [to get a tattoo] and then mum, when I was 16, said that if I still wanted to get one, we should find someone who could do it". As this quote shows, Pete's mother allowed him to get tattooed when he was 16 years old, even though no one in the family is fond of tattoos and they think Pete is 'crazy' every time he gets a new tattoo. Pete has obviously gained his interest in tattoos somewhere beyond his close personal relations and it seems to be a very personal decision that he got tattooed. This fits Giddens' (1991) approach to identity as Pete's story indicates a more individual identity creation when it

comes to tattoos than for example Eric, who seems to be more affected by social identity.

Categorizations and Tribes

Although almost all of the interviewees feel some sort of cohesion with other tattooed people, those who identify themselves as enthusiasts and/or practitioners (and who are heavily tattooed) expressed higher levels of cohesion. This cohesion amongst enthusiasts also came across during the field observations, as those spending time at the tattoo parlors with other purposes than getting tattooed were all heavily tattooed. Expressing the feeling of cohesion amongst enthusiasts, Eric explains what happens when he meets other heavily tattooed people: "I check them out and they also check me out (...), I can't help but looking, when I pass someone who is heavily tattooed. I look and the other person also looks at me and one of us might blink or give a nod: Same as bikers who greet each other on the road." Eric acknowledges that he belongs to a certain group of heavily tattooed people. Eric is also very passionate about tattoos and categorizes himself as an active tattoo enthusiast, who visits different tattoo studios. He is willing to travel to get tattooed by a certain artist and refers to tattoos as a hobby. This aligns with Jenkins' (2006) notion of the difference between categories and groups, where coherence with other tattooed people takes Eric from being in the category of being male and tattooed to the 'next' level as being a member of a group of heavily tattooed people.

One of the difficulties when studying tribes is to identify them. However, various signs can indicate the existence of tribalism. Cova & Cova (2002) work with both visible and invisible signs in their model of tribes. In our case, the more 'invisible' signs are e.g. the experiences that the tattooed people share. As a minimum, all interviewees share the experience of getting a tattoo. However, the experience of actually *getting* a tattoo differs across interviewees with few tattoos and the heavily tattooed interviewees. In particular, this relates to the heavily tattooed interviewees voicing almost an addiction to getting tattooed, or, as Kate explains:

My start was when I was 15 years old and thought that sleeves [entire arm tattoos] were super, super cool; I just wanted that when I would be old enough. There is no doubt that from the beginning when I started, it would end

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with both arms and maybe more; I would also like to have my back tattooed. In that way it was a tricky starting point to have, because the actual process of getting tattooed relates to an addiction that could be purely physiological; because you do get an adrenalin kick and endorphins. The experience decreases the more times you get tattooed, although the kick is still there. But I would say the first few times that you get tattooed you are so psyched afterwards because you are really nervous and the adrenaline is pumping and endorphins are released...

Rather interestingly, only the heavily tattooed interviewees talk about the 'kick' and 'adrenaline pumping' that they get when they get a tattoo and therefore, and as discussed later, it seems that actually *getting* a tattoo is a much more important element in the consumption of tattoos for these interviewees than it is for those with few tattoos.

As for tribalism, (particularly heavily) tattooed people argue that they share their interests in tattoo studios and at tattoo conventions where people not only go to get tattooed, but also talk about tattoos and get inspiration. This aligns with the field observations and the fact that those being present and involved in conversations in the studios and at the convention were visibly, heavily tattooed. Many of our interviewees and one of the experts pointed to the similarities between tattoo parlors and old fashioned record stores where music enthusiasts meet, not only to *buy* records, but also, or more importantly to *talk* about music. Furthermore, Eric speaks of tattoo parlors as follows:

...you get to meet the tattoo artist, and I really like that. Many new tattoo shops are furnished so that it is possible to do so [hang out and talk]. But they have been like that in Copenhagen for a long time and actually both in England and America for a very long time. They have actually focused on people being able to come in enjoy themselves.

In the same vein, and concordant with our observations, one of the tattooists explains that: "...people often stop by [his tattoo parlor] with an idea, just to check if it is doable, and to hear approximately how much it would be and what other opportunities there are... we see that quite a lot". The heavily tattooed interviewees furthermore

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define themselves as enthusiastic about tattoos in general, think a lot about their 'next' tattoos (also when one tattoo is still in the making), buy tattoo magazines, want more tattoos in different styles etc. For example, Carly argued: "There are all kinds of genres in the tattoo world and I want all of them. I want a color one, a classic one, I want a black one and I want a rock'n'roll tattoo. It is kind of a cliché but I want it all...". As mentioned previously, to heavily tattooed interviewees (such as Carly) it is not the individual tattoo that matters the most, but instead the bricolage of tattoos they have (and continuously expand) and they like it if this bricolage includes different genres and styles. In this way, the bricolage is used to signify their deep involvement in the tribe consisting of those addicted and/or profoundly belonging to the world of tattooing.

Conclusion

In order to sum up on the reasons why people get tattoos and how this affects their identity, the notions of *having* a tattoo, *being* tattooed and *getting* tattooed seem to enable us to describe the essence of this type of consumption. Firstly, to people with only one or a few tattoos, *having* a tattoo that signifies something of personal relevance is the key issue. These people get a particular tattoo because it is a 'durable' symbol of something that is important to them (whether it be an event, a personal value or a beloved one) – a symbol they cannot easily and do not intend to ever 'dispose' of, but instead anticipate that they will carry as a self-inflicted stigma for their entire life. In comparison with Goffman's (2010) rather negative view on stigma (as markers that enable 'normal majority' to identify 'deviants'), in general the interviewees enact their tattoos as self-inflicted markers of their identity. As such, their perceptions of their tattoos concord much more with Jenkins's (2006) view on stigma as a process individuals go through (or actively take on) in the quest to define who they are, and the tattoos thus become self-inflicted stigmas in the form of bodily manifestations of the 'place' in society the interviewees wish to occupy. To the people with one or only a few tattoos, the symbol or stigma in the form of a tattoo often relates more to personal than social identity and although the tattoo defines who these people are, they do not necessarily put this symbol on 'display'. As for the heavily tattooed interviewees, although they sometimes told stories about their first tattoos resembling the stories told by the interviewees with few tattoos, to the heavily tat-

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toed interviewees *being* tattooed and *getting* tattooed seem to be far more important. As for the notion of *being* tattooed this relates to a more social identity relating to the individual being 'a tattooed person'. As a result, it is the bricolage, not the individual tattoos that matters and it is through the seemingly never-ending process of getting more and more tattoos that these people continuously strengthen their belonging to the tribe dedicated to tattooing. Therefore, it is the bricolage of tattoos, not the individual tattoos, that becomes the self-inflicted and positive stigma that these individuals share with the surrounding society. Furthermore, as these people spend vast amounts of time 'under the needle', they do not only do so in order to enjoy the 'end product'. Instead, the physical act of *getting* tattooed (hereby getting a 'kick' or experiencing an adrenaline rush) is an imperative element of their consumption of tattoos – and an element seemingly not shared with the less tattooed interviewees.

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