

INSCRIBING THE PERSONAL MYTH: THE ROLE OF TATTOOS IN IDENTIFICATION

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The purpose of this article is to better understand the role of tattooing in identity construction. The study of tattoo consumption opposes traditional forms of consumer research in at least three ways: they are permanent, infinitely customized, and destabilize object/body oppositions. It is for these reasons that they come to represent the way people make meaning of their lives. This meaning-making centrally involves storytelling; the creation and sharing of stories of the self. Seven stories are presented; with each story we discuss the on-going process of identity negotiation by exploring the informant's *personal myth*. A personal myth is a story that brings together a wide range of experiences into a purposeful and convincing whole. Inter-story analyses reveal that for some informants, their personal myths represent a narrative sequence of redemption, moving from bad to good. For others, their personal myths represent a narrative sequence of contamination, moving from good to bad. These life-narrative accounts are especially useful in accounting for life transitions or turning points. It is these transitions that can help us better understand the use of objects as signs in identity negotiation. The article concludes by linking the redemption versus contamination theme to cultural perceptions of the sacred and other meta-narratives of modernity.

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The human body has always been used as a means for expression. Body modification such as tattooing, branding, scarring, piercing, make-up, clothing, hairstyle, and other forms of adornment are ways of signaling identity by marking individual creativity, one's place in society, a special experience, or resistance to cultural practices. Permanent forms of adornment, such as tattoos, provide an interesting case for consumer researchers since it is unclear whether they become part of the body or simply adorn the body. (This ambiguity enables tattooing to slip between polarities customarily used to organize experience and understand the distinction between self and body) (Taylor, 1995). Given that most theories of consumption objects assume easy acquisition and disposition, and that objects are separate from the body, exploring the consumer's use of tattoos has important implications for the use of consumption as a means to construct identity (Belk, 1988; Joy & Venkatesh, 1994; McCracken, 1988; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). The purpose of this research is therefore to better understand the role of tattooing, as one form of consumption, on identity construction. This aim builds on a small but promising stream of research that focuses on the role of the body and body adornment on the consumer's on-going task of identity negotiation (Murray, 2002; Schouten, 1991; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). /

(Tattooing has been studied from a sociological perspective as deviant social behavior (Sanders, 1989), from an anthropological perspective as a mark of civilization (Rubin, 1988), from a cultural perspective as a mediator of class dynamics (Demello, 2000), and from a historical perspective with an emphasis on the various roles that body adornment may play in society (Polhemus & Housk, 1996).) In recent years, tattooing has gained wide acceptance and therefore has become palatable for middle-class consumption (Demello, 2000). It has been estimated that 12–20 million Americans have joined the ranks of the tattooed (Blouin, 1996). In 1996, tattoo studios were among the top six growth businesses in the United States (American Business Information, Inc., 1996). In 1960, there were approximately 500 professional tattoo artists operating in the United States and by 1995 that number had increased to over 10,000 (Hardy, 1995). Various forms of popular media culture reflect the recent popularity of tattoos, which further fuels this Renaissance. For example, several well-known companies and products such as The Gap, Ralph Lauren Polo, Calvin Klein, Guess, Absolute Vodka, Kodak, Sony, Snickers, and even Jello-puddings and gelatins feature tattooed models and images in their advertisements. Further, various rock stars, movie stars, sports heroes, and superstar models are tattooed. Finally, Mattel's introduction of a tattooed Barbie doll is a clear sign of

paraphrase this paragraph later

middle-class acceptance. (This Renaissance has created a new role for tattooing in America, which many cultural observers now refer to as the *new tattoo subculture*. The qualifier "new" conveys the fragmentation of the subculture shifting the focus to localized subject positions that have developed around fashion, lifestyle, and identity. Maffesoli (1996) refers to these subject positions as neotribes or emotional communities. This implies that the term "subculture," and the parent culture against which it is defined, are not coherent and homogeneous formations that can be clearly demarcated (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). Indeed, the new tattoo "subculture" is an overarching label for a very diverse group. This group includes a wide range of subgroups or communities, such as the biker tattoo community, the middle-class elite tattoo community (Demello, 2000), the young punk tattoo community, or other brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) that have grown-up around particular artists or styles of tattooing such as the *modern primitives* (Camphausen, 1997). The new tattoo "subculture" also includes the less involved, non-core consumer who may have a single tattoo on their ankle, hip, lower back, arm, or shoulder but has never seen a tattoo magazine or attended a tattoo conference. The one thing all of these consumers share is the experience of being tattooed.)

Interpreting consumers' stories about being tattooed will help us better understand the ways these experiences contribute to the construction of identity. A useful approach to understanding a wide range of images and activities in contemporary culture can be found in the concept *myth* (Barthes, 1972). "Myths" are cultural stories that have gained wide acceptance for their ability to communicate something fundamental about life (Levi-Strauss, 1978). These stories are often deemed sacred since they are able to capture and express a culture's basic psychological, sociological, cosmological, and metaphysical reality. They play a role in preserving a culture's integrity and continuity. In addition, myths are important since they provide a vehicle to enrich personal meaning. This indicates that what myths traditionally have done on the level of culture can also be accomplished on a personal level (Feinstein, 1979; McAdams, 1993). A *personal myth* is a story that brings together a wide range of experiences into a purposeful and convincing whole (McAdams, 1993). It is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future. From this perspective, each of us attempts to create a heroic story, a compelling aesthetic statement (McAdams, 1993). This personal myth or story is our identity and it is a sacred, dynamic, and continuous project. The body, and the way that it is adorned, is part of one's identity project; individuals use an ensemble of products and brands as sign-systems to embody their personal myths./

The next section discusses the methodological procedures used to collect consumer stories about being tattooed. Following this section, seven stories are presented; with each story we discuss the on-going process of identity negotiation by exploring the informant's creation and management of their personal myth. Finally, in the discussion section, a key theme from the cases will be used to discuss the use of consumption as a means to construct identity.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In order to emphasize in-depth analyses of individual life stories, seven informants were selected. Since breadth of experience will contribute to a more detailed contextualization of the consumer's use of products in identity negotiation, diversity across informants was emphasized. Interviews generally followed the format as suggested by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989). A comfortable setting was chosen and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Interviews were audio-taped and lasted anywhere from one to just over two hours. Grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988) focused on the meaning of the tattoo design, the experience of being tattooed, perceptions of the body, words the informants used to describe themselves, and other biographical information important for understanding the informant's personal myth. Every effort was made to present a natural front, keep the informant on track without being too directive, demonstrate active listening, and prompt the informant as a way of probing for details (Spradley, 1979). To ensure accuracy, an experienced and trained transcriptionist transcribed each of the seven interviews. The final text totaled 450 typed double-spaced pages.

Analyses proceeded by using a hermeneutical approach as proposed by Thompson (1997). For each phase in the analyses an interpretive group was used to enrich and develop the interpretation (Rowe et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1989). The interpretive group used a dialogal approach (Rowe et al., 1989) and consisted of the three coauthors of this article. The group would meet once a week; read the transcribed interviews aloud and dialog about potential interpretations. In the first phase of analysis, the interpretive group focused on the temporal sequencing of key events and narrative movement, including the formation of a personal myth, for each informant (Stern, 1995). Each case was then written as a narrative or story paying close attention to contextual complexities. In the second phase of analysis, the interpretive group sought common story lines between narratives. In this phase, the group began the more abstract process of conceptualizing or

forming an ethic interpretation. Both phases were useful in conceptualizing the use of consumption as a means to identification.

INTRACASE RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Jewel: Dreaming of Healing

Jewel is a single, 28 year old, Lebanese-American college student studying anthropology, ethnic dance, and Arabic. Jewel's mother was from Louisiana and her father from Lebanon. After her parents divorced when Jewel was very young, she was raised by her mother in Monroe, Louisiana. By the time Jewel was 20; both parents had died of cancer within a year of each other. As a way of coping with these deaths, Jewel turned to art therapy, which eventually led to an interest in body art. Jewel's personal myth is about using art and her creative imagination to transcend and heal the grief she feels from her parents' deaths.

And that was really when I got into my body art was through that time period when I lost them. My father passed away right after my mom, and so I was questioning it all. I was like, you know, how can I birth this into something positive? I've got to make it okay, and all I could think of was my art. I was in art therapy. I was doing a lot of art and it surfaced onto my body, it just flowed everywhere. I was doing paintings and poetry and getting tattooed. I had to do something. I personally have to do creative things in order to heal pain and it really was part of that. The body art for me was a way to mark something permanently, that permanently shaped me, and say, I can take it and make it beautiful. I can express something that permanently marks me, an experience, and wear it proudly. (Jewel)

Jewel was interviewed in a private area of a coffee shop close to campus. As she entered the shop, the interviewer (first author) was taken back by her striking appearance. Jewel is tall, thin but shapely, with an athletic dancer's physique. She has long black hair, a narrow face, strong jaw line, high cheekbones, olive toned smooth skin, and rich brown eyes. Jewel has a small black tribal tattoo in the shape of a spiral on her forehead which adds to her sensual and exotic appearance. She begins the interview by listing her tattoos. In addition to the small spiral in the center of her forehead, Jewel has a circle of flowers on her upper back between her shoulder blades, a Luna moth design centered on her lower back, an Egyptian water lily band around her left upper arm, a green and black serpent on her right upper arm, a band of flowers around her left ankle, the phases of the moon around her right ankle, and finally, a lotus flower design also on her right ankle.

For Jewel, art and the creative process helped her to understand and interpret her life experiences in a meaningful way. What makes this creative process so intriguing is how she came to decide on the specific designs that are now permanently engraved on her skin. Jewel explains that most of the design ideas came to her in dreams or visions. She perceives these dreams/visions to be her inner voice. Although initially unaware of the significance of each of the images, Jewel would eventually connect their symbolic meaning to the events that were occurring in her life.

Some of these [referring to her tattoo designs] were actually dreams, recurring dreams I kept having that I just couldn't deny. The most important one was when my mom died I kept having this recurring dream about this green serpent. I had never really put much thought into the symbolism behind the serpent, except that I started having this dream and then it got more intense and more visual and happening more often and it became this connection to my psyche. Somehow, it manifested itself as my subconscious, for whatever reason, this green, harmless, yet serpent-like creature and it would almost come and bring me through a doorway to cross over. It was almost like a window, when it would appear in my dreams. So this dream kept coming and it kept taking me deeper and deeper into, literally into the earth, into myself, symbolically. And at the end of this whole process, the serpent finally took me to my mother, about three years into this series of dreams, and I was writing all this poetry about it and everything, and finally it took me to my mother, deep in the earth and she said, 'I just didn't know how else to come to you, connect with you, but I feel like now that we have a language, I'm going to move on, and we're going to always have this connection,' and I just went, 'oh, okay.' And I went out and had a green serpent tattooed on me, and it's my most intense for sure. It is so much about death, but it is really about rebirth too, and it's a shedding. I began to do all of this research on the symbolism of the serpent [after the recurring dreams] and I got to thinking about the serpent as woman energy, as the feminine force in the universe. This is not an evil serpent creature. It's something real earthy and feminine, something very connected to the earth, yet almost suppressed, or you know, made to the dark side, like death; yet a symbol of rebirth too. I was just researching common mythologies throughout all of human history and have just maintained this really strong bond with that animal or that symbol ever since. And so, I just listened to my inner voice in that way and it manifested itself on me as that. (Jewel)

Jewel's research on the symbolism of the serpent revealed that the serpent or snake is one of the most common dream symbols of transcendence. In *Man and his Symbols* (1964), Carl Jung explains that snakes are universal archetypes. These are collectively assimilated ideas or deeply held patterns of thought. Thus, the cultural imagery or myth of the snake is shared because it is subtly passed on as one becomes acculturated. Jewel believes that the snake was sent as a message to free her from the pain: "Yeah, a message, whether it's from my own soul trying to soothe me or whether it's a message from beyond." According to Jewel, the snake represents primal energy, like the *kundalini* serpent in the Hindu religion.

It's the Hindu idea, the yogic concept of your chi raising itself through your chakras, or your body, in the form of a snake, the kundalini serpent, this serpent-energy rises up in your soul, your chi energy, it's in each one of us and its powerful energy that can be damaging or it can be like the highest of enlightenment. (Jewel)

Through her dreams, research, and art therapy, Jewel learned how to channel her energy into something positive. The serpent became a symbol of release, liberation, or healing.

Other designs also came to Jewel through her dreams. After the death of her father, she experienced recurring dreams of a lotus blooming. Since Jewel had studied Eastern religions and yoga, she was familiar with the symbolism of the lotus. The lotus rises in the morning from muddy waters to flower and is therefore a symbol of purity or rebirth:

And this one was when my father died, and it's an Egyptian water lily, which was the psycho-active drug of the Egyptians. And I had a lot of surrealistic dreams in and around my father's death of something, a beautiful symbol of rebirth that would be connected to him and I kept coming up with this lotus blooming and I can't get this image out of my mind, so I've had it tattooed a couple of times on me, just the lotus, the basic lotus design. I'd like to have lotuses all over. (Jewel)

Some of Jewel's tattoos are the result not of dreams but of significant experiences. For example, after the death of her parents, she traveled to Papua New Guinea with the Peace Corps where she bonded with the women of a particular tribe by sharing her stories of dreams and tattoos. These women were all tattooed with spiral designs representing the cycles of life. Upon her return, Jewel tattooed a spiral design on her forehead to mark and remember the experience. Jewel also traveled to Lebanon where she chose a henna-like design of flowers and the letter "O," which represents a passageway to the spiritual world. In another example, around the time of her mother's death, she claimed to have sightings of a very rare Luna moth. Because it grows from a cocoon, the moth symbolizes the soul, transformation, and rebirth; the creation of life from apparent death:

The thing about my Luna moth was that I actually did have a Luna moth appear at certain times when I was losing my mom that were really coming up for me later. I don't see them very often, yet right around her death, I had some sightings, and they are rare, and they just kept coming up and I kept going, 'God, how beautiful, thank you, what a gift.' I needed something to take me beyond the grief. Some symbol of beauty. I choose to see the symbolism in animals and the things that present themselves to me because that's just what I would like to think. I would like to think that this Luna moth came to me. That this serpent in my dream was a doorway rather than something evil. (Jewel)

For Jewel, tattoos are a way of mapping key experiences and events that take place in her life. When she explains the meaning of her tattoos, she is

describing her life story. Since the death of her parents was so important, nearly all of her tattoos relate in some way to the grieving and healing process. Jewel's tattoos serve as a constant reminder of peace or resolve, which has enabled her to move forward with day-to-day living. The tattoo, in this context, marks a life passage and becomes a symbol of healing.

When I'm naked and I'm looking at myself, I'm looking beyond my physicality into what I have gone through. I see my body art as my road map of my life; my life story is written out for me to always remember. It will always symbolize a time or place I've been or something that I went through, and therefore, it's part of me. It is really all about the timing and the reason. The symbol behind the sign or art itself is all about a time and place. Like we talked earlier, I got most of the tattoos during the death of my parents, and so whenever there's something really intense going on, I have always marked it on me through a tattoo, the experience. (Jewel)

Jewel's personal myth takes on an exotic and transcendental feel. Given the audience, which includes anthropology, ethnic dance and Arabic students, colleagues from the Peace Corp, and coworkers from a part time job at a local food cooperative, this myth is viewed as creative, interesting, and agentic. Thus, social reactions to her tattoos have been very positive and reinforcing. This enables Jewel to view herself as a traveler, embodying her personal myth by marking meaning as she moves through life's passages./

Jack: Working Through Crisis

Jack is a 58-year-old Native American who is widowed with five children. He has a Ph.D. in sociology and currently teaches at a large state university. Jack has a number of elaborate tattoos that fit together forming a continuous artistic pattern over most of his upper body. His personal myth is about using Native American imagery to find distinction as a way of working through an identity crisis.

Jack was interviewed in his office on campus. He is of medium height and weight and appears to be very fit with well-defined shoulders and arms. Jack's skin is dark and weathered with an almost leather-like appearance. He has brown eyes and a round-shaped face and head, which he shaves bald. Jack has all the trappings and style of an older college professor, tattered leather briefcase, corduroy jacket, sweaters, and an office cluttered with books, journals, and papers. With a dash of impatient cynicism, he speaks fast as if still teaching and is interesting to talk to. Jack explains that most of his tattoos are Native American symbols and that he started getting tattoos after his wife died to help him deal with the pain of losing her. He calls this time in his life an "identity crisis."

Jack begins by showing the interviewer two tattoos on his left wrist. The first is of a lizard, which represents the grieving process after his wife died. The second is a Snoopy character, which Jack acquired after his grandson died./

My wife had died and I'm Native American, you brand yourself when someone you love dies, so I got this lizard thing. The lizard was also a symbol you put on you like medicine. It's a symbol for healing. The Snoopy I got when my grandchild died. It is a real nice way of grieving. This grieving thing is a physical thing you can actually do, at the same time, this is sort of like an ending ceremony. (Jack)

Jack continues the interview by taking off his shirt to display his other tattoos. On his left arm, shoulder, back, and chest he has a number of tattoos that run together creating a collage or mural. First, he has an arm-band of intertwined coral snakes with a Gordian knot in the center. For Jack, this tattoo represents the uncertainty and complexity of life. Second, he has a turtle design, which represents nature or the earth. Next, an eagle and a red sun, which represents the sky; then a water bird design, representing peace, completes the left shoulder collage. On his right arm, shoulder, back, and chest Jack has a tribal arm band of buffalo skulls, a bear paw, two Alaskan medicine masks, an eagle head, a Plains Indian, a woodpecker design, and an animal that is a combination of a fish and a horse. Again, all of these designs represent various meanings associated with Native American culture.

In terms of social roles and position, Jack has a clear understanding of who he is. He has been a professor for a long time and is recognized and respected for his contribution to academia. Jack is also active and well established in his community; and is close to his kids and family. However, the personal reflection that occurred after the loss of his wife and grandson led to questions about what Jenkins (1996) calls "individual identity" or what Bourdieu (1984) calls "distinction."

They all have meaning. I don't like one more than the other; a lot of people ask me why did you get so many tattoos? The first thing is you're going to make this big decision; I'm going to be a person with a tattoo. You know you are different from most people. Just bottom line, standing in line at Wal-Mart. I know I'm different. After that, when you start getting the second and third tattoo, it really does become more personalized. It becomes an idea that it is more of a reflection of who you think you are. (Jack)

Jack's first three tattoos (i.e., lizard, Snoppy, and Gordian knot) signify his identity crisis. After the death of his wife and grandson, life appeared unpredictable, uncertain, complicated, and sad. The Gordian knot, in particular, represents a problematic complexity; a time in his life when he faced challenging problems relating to identification. The death of his wife forced

a dramatic reflection and reevaluation as to who he was, is, and will become. As he worked through the crisis, Jack turned to his Native American heritage for support. He embraced a Native American *imago* as a main character in his personal myth to push the narrative forward. "Imagoes" are archetypal patterns for human thought and action that compose idealized personifications in personal myth (McAdams, 1993, p. 124). Imagoes personify aspects of who you believe you were, who you are now, or who you might be in the future. Jack's Native American tattoos signify nature, earth, sky, and peace; all symbols that represent the antithesis of crisis. He is therefore using artistic expression, the ritual of the tattoo, and the personification of Native American symbolism to work through his identity crisis. This enables Jack to view himself as a healer or caregiver, preserving nature and the domestic traditions that bring people together in family and community. In the below excerpt, Jack reflects on the use of the tattoo for artistic expression.

I: Do you consider tattooing an art form?

Jack: If I tell them what to do. Their basis [the tattooist] is that it is art, but what they do on my body isn't art until I say it is and that starts with number one. You know this is what we are doing, here's where it goes, and this is how it's gonna look, this is the size and this is the color. Its art once it's on me the way I want it. I don't see them as the artist.

I: So art has to be an expression that is related to you?

Jack: Yes, it's my art, not theirs. Now they may see themselves as artists, but what I see is I'm the artist and I'm doing this on me. They are just putting it on me. This is my painting, not theirs. I'm not their blank canvas. They may do good work, but, I have to have input or it's just another old tattoo. Art is an expression, and it's gonna be something I carry around, so it's gonna be mine. If I want it to express a lot about me, I have to have the input.

Both Jewel and Jack were using artistic expression and the tattoo as an aesthetic resource in the context of coping. Jewel used tattoos to discover a symbolic connection to her parents and Jack used tattoos to reconnect to his Native American heritage. Jack's audience consists primarily of sociology and anthropology students and professors. These are people who study and understand the cultural role of body adornment. This understanding encourages tolerance and acceptance of Jack's tattoos and their meanings. Thus, like Jewel, Jack experiences positive and nurturing social reaction. This enables Jack to view himself as a professor traveler, a sage, expressing, reflecting, and teaching his way out of crisis./

Jenny: Coping with Stigma

Jenny's story illustrates that symbolic consumption, in the context of identity construction, depends not only on the consumer's interpretation but also on the imagined interpretation of others. These interpretations reflect a cultural context, which ties meaning and identity to a historical and structural era. Thus, this case represents a critique of postmodern theories of identity. Consumers cannot always act to construct a desired self using the aesthetic resources of the day. Since identity depends on social recognition, it becomes a negotiated project between what one desires and what society will accept.

Jenny is 44 years old, teaches part-time at a large state university, and is married with two children. When asked to describe herself she responds with "sociologist, teacher, mentor, colleague, mother, wife, niece, middle-class, musician, and alternative culture person." Jenny's personal myth tells the story of a survivor, hanging on to counterculture idealism but needing a persona that blends with the professional woman, juggling career, kids, and marriage.

Jenny is tall with a stocky build; she has long, wavy, thick brown hair, which she wears down, and brown eyes. On the day of the interview she wore very little makeup, a long loose fitting dress and had a comfortable, attractive, natural look, or what could be described informally as a granola/hippie appearance. Jenny was interviewed in a performing arts hall on a quiet day with no performances. She began by showing the interviewer her only two tattoos. The first is on her right wrist and is a treble clef symbol representing her love of music. This tattoo is positioned so that she can easily hide it under her wristwatch. The second tattoo is on the right side of Jenny's back near the shoulder blade and is a large marijuana leaf representing her identification with "alternative culture." This tattoo can also be easily hidden under a shirt. For Jenny, "alternative culture" is the more liberal, anti-establishment, non-mainstream youth counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Both these tattoos are solid blue and since they are over 20 years old they appear faded and frayed around the edges.

I just always wanted one. When I was eighteen, I wanted an expression of my kind of culture feelings, you know. In a way it's kind of like long hair or something. It expresses something to the people that you want to express it to. When I was eighteen, my life was all about the counterculture and even when I got the tattoos [early 20s], I had just begun graduate school, and in graduate school, I still could live that kind of countercultural life. (Jenny)

Note that in the above excerpt Jenny states that she acquired her tattoos to express "something to the people that you want to express it to." Later, she

states that when in graduate school, "I could still live that kind of countercultural life." Thus, the original audience for her tattoos included like-minded peers who were providing positive recognition and support. This reinforcement allowed Jenny to find meaning and identity.

Jenny began thinking about her association with countercultural values in her late teens and acquired her tattoos in her early 20s. This transition from late adolescence to young adulthood is an especially significant phase in the development of identity. Crucial to this phase is to find meaningful answers to ideological questions so that one's identity can be built on a solid foundation (McAdams, 1993). Jenny's commitment to counterculture ideals provides the ideological setting for her personal myth. Her tattoos represent this setting and commitment. It was not until after graduate school, when Jenny began applying for teaching jobs that she started to reflect on her tattoos from a new frame of reference.

When I was ready to get a job and go out into the professional world, I thought of it then as a real hindrance. I don't feel good about having this big marijuana leaf on my back. To me it's like a professional career is hard enough. I think women first of all have a harder time, and I just think that anything that I add to my appearance of deviance, I worry about that. So I'm not real comfortable with it. I'm not sure that somebody with a bunch of tattoos can get accepted in a professional culture. People look at the university and say, 'The University is kind of cool, it's kind of free,' but I don't think of it as free. I think of it as very stringent in its norms and behavioral expectations. (Jenny)

Jenny's ideological setting has endured over the last 20 years, she still thinks of herself as an "alternative culture person." What has changed is Jenny's imagined judgment of others as she enters new roles. In the excerpt below, she refers to social interaction with a number of other groups including kids, parents, and students.

I think of myself as an alternative culture person, but yet, if my kids had a swimming party at their school, and they invited parents, I wouldn't wear a bathing suit around my kids' friends' parents. I wouldn't even want my students to see that you know. I mean there are ones that would see it and say, 'Oh cool.' But for the most part, they would never be able to hear what I said, it would be, 'Oh well, she's just a freak.' You don't really know what things contribute to peoples' impressions of you. I worry about stuff like that.

Note that Jenny does not ask about the actual interpretation others may have of her tattoos. Instead, she imagines their interpretation on the basis of her understanding of culturally prescribed expectations associated with professional roles. Since Jenny's ideological setting consists of the values and beliefs of an anti-establishment counterculture, her perceptions of professional and suburban families tend to be stereotypical and largely

negative. In other words, she evaluates herself from the vantage point of her view of mainstream dress and behavior. Since this imagined evaluation is negative, she feels scarred and stigmatized by her tattoos. This indicates that an identity is never purely individual but depends on the recognition, interpretation, and support of others. Since one's social context is constantly evolving and changing, it also indicates that identity construction is ongoing.

Jenny's story is dominated by contradictory imagoes. The first imago personifies the counterculture character: young, free, and rebellious. The second imago personifies the responsible adult, struggling to balance career, motherhood, and marriage. This indicates that as we formulate more mature life stories in adulthood, we begin to realize that ultimately our identities are woven into a historical and social fabric. Thus, something Jenny did not anticipate when she acquired her tattoos was that she would be motivated to change her look on the basis of new, more mainstream, roles. Aesthetic resources such as art, fashion, and music are used not only for intrinsic creative expression but also as resources for impression management and identity work. In addition, the political and oppressive potential of the symbolic should not be ignored. Whereas the symbolism of Jenny's tattoos was at one time liberating, it is now repressive. This implies that objects alone do not carry meaning as some consumer researchers suggest (e.g., McCracken, 1986). Meaning is interpreted by individuals who are coping with particular forms of social reaction inherent to a cultural context. In other words, meaning results from the dialectical interplay between coping individuals and the cultural context which structures the expression.

The cultural context for Jewel and Jack resulted in positive social recognition and support for their use of tattoos to express their stories. Their social positions allowed for freedom and role flexibility when forging identity. Indeed, their audiences were tolerant of a wide range of creative expressions. This was not the case for Jenny. She imagines more critical social recognition, which inhibits the free expression of values and beliefs. This anticipated negative reaction destabilizes her personal myth of being an "alternative culture person." This destabilization forced Jenny to reinterpret and reformulate her identity. She now thinks about her narrative in terms of a tension between her ideological context of counterculture idealism and what she perceives as the more provincial world of middle-class, suburban juggler. Jenny's identity is now structured around the anticipated negative reaction of her audience; her tattoos signify a struggle between her past and her present.

Mike: Surviving a Double-Life

Mike is 36 years old, tall and thin, with medium length wavy blond hair, and blue eyes. He works part time as a political cartoonist for a local newspaper and full time as a flower delivery person. Mike is married with two children and devotes all of his spare time to his family and artistic endeavors, e.g., painting and drawing. He is representative of the underground tattoo artist in that he gave himself most of his tattoos and worked for awhile as a tattoo artist out of his home. Mike's personal myth is about the use of his body to construct a deviant persona of armor, which he later regrets.

Mike settled into his sofa at home for the interview wearing jeans, boots, and a long sleeve flannel shirt open with a t-shirt underneath. He opened the interview by describing his tattoos: a dragon with a woman's name under it, a skull over a pair of dice, a marijuana leaf with the word "dope" below it, the anarchy symbol, two cherries with the date he lost his virginity, the Led Zeppelin design, a nude woman, a rose with a knife blade through it dripping blood, and the grim reaper. The largest tattoo is about ten inches tall and they are all faded and unprofessional crude badge-like images.

Mike talked a lot about his childhood during the interview. He grew up in a rough working-class neighborhood and his parents could not afford luxuries for the family. Mike explained that he often felt insecure, inadequate, and believed that he was never able to quite measure up to his peers. Further, he was usually the youngest and smallest in his class and therefore was frequently teased and picked on. These early experiences set the ideological context for his tattoos. Mike chose to use tattoos to construct a persona that would compensate for what he perceived to be his childhood deficiencies, particularly his size and passive demeanor:

I think another reason I got my tattoos was a way of compensating for not being a very violent person, not wanting to fight and I grew up in a poor family in a rough neighborhood. Certainly, we were one of the families with lesser income in the school. And yeah, I felt some of that. I wore patches on my clothes occasionally, and of course no child ever wants to do that. I had the experience in seventh grade, there being a student in my class who had flunked a couple of years and for some reason he singled me out to pick on and he picked on me for the entire year and broke a big ole chip out of my jawbone. I do not like violence. I don't like to engage in it. The several times that I have in my life, I thoroughly regretted it. You know, I'd rather scare people with my looks. (Mike)

In the excerpt above, Mike states that he would rather scare people with his looks; if he appears mean enough he would not have to fight. His deviant, tattooed body serves as a warning to others, compensating for his slight

build and non-violent values. In this way, Mike uses his tattoos as armor, a persona of toughness that would mask his vulnerabilities: "A way to avoid entanglements is to seem tough. And I wore heavy boots, and my chain wallet and I could look, I guess, pretty scary, with all my tattoos showing." Ironically, Mike embraces a warrior imago to help manage an impression of fear so that he does not have to fight. He is becoming a warrior in order to escape the battle.

In contrast to Jenny, Mike's tattoos were not being used to express who he was, but to create instead, who he was not. Mike's tattoos helped to create a fictional self: "Somebody not to be messed with." Although this image protected him when he was younger, over the years, he began to feel stigmatized by his appearance. As Mike matured and took on new roles, he realized that he no longer needed the protection of a tough deviant persona. Below, he mentions his backyard, neighbors, and kids, all part of a suburban middle-class lifestyle:

Mike: Sometimes I'm in the backyard and my neighbors will come out and they'll catch a glimpse of me and I know that they know I have tattoos, but the first time they see it, know that takes them back. Maybe they think I am living a double life.

I: Do you feel that way?

Mike: I feel that way sometimes. One time I took our kids to the pool, the city pool, but I went to the pool in the poor section of town, nowhere near where we lived, where no one would even know me.

Using inflexible signs as an aesthetic resource to shape a persona may over time create the feeling of a split identity, or as Mike phrases it, a "double-life." What started out as armor, protecting him in one context, became stigmatizing in another context. Like Jenny, Mike did not anticipate the negative impact the tattoos would have later in life as he struggled to be successful in his new roles as husband, father, and community member. As Mike became aware that his tough persona communicated a negative image, extreme feelings of regret began to surface: "Just becoming aware of other folks' impressions of me when they would see them [the tattoos], of not being what I thought I was. Everybody's number one assumption was I'd been in prison for a long time, people saw you as a thug, an ex-con." Mike has internalized a caregiver imago and other people's negative reactions to his tattoos destabilize this part of his identity. The only way Mike can now manage others' impressions is by covering up and hiding his tattoos:

I'm pretty much long sleeves, long pants if I don't want to show the tattoos. And that's pretty much what I wear all the time. At every job I've had, I've just covered my tattoos; no matter what the temperature, the conditions, I just tough it out. I blew glass for years

in the heat here in the south with long sleeves in the summer. The only time I can remember not wearing long sleeves was for a short time while I worked construction when I first moved here and I worked with a really, really, rough bunch. Even with my tattoos, I was the cleanest cut fellow in the bunch, so I did occasionally take my shirt off with that bunch. (Mike)

In conclusion, Mike's identity is characterized by an interesting combination of agentic and communal imagoes. The body has been constructed with all of the signs of the streetwise warrior; yet Mike's values reflect a caring family man, needing to be integrated to middle-class suburbia. Note that the social reaction to his tattoos is negative in both contexts. In the first context, the negative reaction helped him construct a body image, which caused fear and respect. In the second context, the negative reaction also causes fear, but now the fear destabilizes his caregiver role making identity an ongoing negotiation between his self conceptions as a middle-class family man and the perceptions of other families he may interact with. A key expressive strategy in this negotiation is to cover up and hide his tattoos. If successful, Mike is able to hide his warrior self and become a "normal" person. At other times, members of his neighborhood community will "catch a glimpse" of his tattoos and Mike is forced to negotiate, cope, or generally survive the reality of his double-life.

Dylan: Fighting for Freedom

Dylan and the first author met for lunch at the student union. After eating, they settled back in a quiet corner of the cafeteria for the interview. Dylan is 22, medium height and build with long curly hair, which he keeps messy. He is handsome and, like Jewel, his tattoos are noticeable on his neck and hands creating a striking and exotic appearance. Dylan is a musician: "I play music that is what I do, I am a drummer." Unable to support himself only as a drummer, he also works at construction. Dylan's personal myth is the creation of an empowering body project that represents an expression of resistance. In the excerpt below, he discusses his feelings about tattoos. In addition, Dylan mentions his most noticeable tattoos; these include the word "FUN" tattooed in large letters across the front of his neck, and the word "EVERLAST" tattooed across his knuckles.

Dylan: As time went on, I started thinking more and more about how I feel and why I want to get certain tattoos. I intertwine the tattoos with how I feel about things. It is not a tattoo for me, it is a symbol; like after the tattoo, you are past the tattoo now, it is a new step into life; it is kind of a positive thing. They might really look strange, but it is

actually an extremely positive thing for me. Every tattoo is either a part of my life where it helps me remember that part of my life, or how I felt then. It is just a really positive thing in the end. You know, like my neck. It just kind of all evolves into that. You know, just FUN. It is to be able to laugh, truly laugh, is the way to be.

I: Live life and have fun?

Dylan: Yeah, because I do not need to be serious all the time. I have my hands done, which is a positive thing too. It is just EVERLAST; you know, 'everlasting,' just sticking with whatever it is that makes you happy.

Dylan started getting tattoos when he was 16 years old. At the time, he had just moved out of his parents' home and in with his friends. Dylan, along with his small group of friends, made a commitment to each other to pursue their dream of playing in a band. As a way of marking their commitment to the dream, and as a way strengthening their bond to each other, they began to get tattoos. In the excerpts below, Dylan discusses his commitment to music and friendship.

I play music. That is the only thing I really focus on, you know? I do not really think about politics right now, because there is no need. Because I would like to live and I know if I ever really ended up doing anything serious I would just be dead. And I would like to live for awhile, you know. (Dylan)

They all make me remember certain parts of my life. It is just like a friendship thing. Like I have a million tattoos that I want to get. Like I want to get I LOVE ALL MY FRIENDS on my stomach, because it is really a friendship thing and it is a bonding between you and the tattoo guy. (Dylan) /

Since many of the tattoos were acquired in the context of friendship, bonding, and shared dreams, Dylan, and his friends, chose to be tattooed with matching images. For example, the band members had the name of their band, "Empire of Shit," tattooed on their legs. Other tattoos that Dylan acquired include a Buddhist demon making the rock-n-roll sign and a Japanese Kodo symbol that represents the Kodo drummers, which he describes as a "disciplined, military-like drumming group with a thunderous sound." Further, many of the tattoos that Dylan has were given to him by friends in his band who were also practicing to become professional, licensed tattoo artists. It is clear that Dylan's reference group became an important grounding or centering force in his life. As a way of committing to this group, as well as a way of capturing and remembering this experience, Dylan used the tattoo as an aesthetic resource. Given that the tattoo is a permanent mark on the body, the meaning that these tattoos represent also became a permanent part of Dylan.

As Dylan began to expand his experience beyond his music primary group, he discovered a very different reaction to his tattoos, particularly when trying to find work. In short, he found the same type of stigmatization and discrimination experienced by Jenny and Mike:

Dylan: People do not realize the undying discrimination that goes on.

I: Where you have chosen to get them makes a difference?

Dylan: I know, it is kind of like, 'Well, what are you thinking? Of course you are not going to get a job,' but think about it, what is wrong with it? I really do not want to get into this. Like when I lived in Texas, this guy would not let me wait tables. He made me wash dishes and flip burgers. I was getting paid really badly, like under six dollars an hour to do all that. He would not let me wait tables. He would tell me flat out, 'You are too tattooed. This is a family restaurant.' Even though there were tons of weirdoes working there. I called the NAACP and left a message saying that I had been discriminated against; I just do not understand what is wrong.

I: Would you feel differently if they were symbols or images of something more negative?

Dylan: Yeah, it's like I have FUN on my neck, I do not have like FUCK YOU or KILL MOM on my throat or something like that. People think that it is like this biker thing or just like it is this heathen thing. I do not know what the hell they are thinking.

In the above excerpt, Dylan is discussing a job that involves interacting with the public frequently (i.e., waiting tables at a restaurant) and therefore issues of appearance and impression management become important. However, he also discovered discrimination when working construction, which involved little or no social interaction with the public:

And they can legitimately call and say, 'We do not want him to come out.' And I don't know if they necessarily said that because of my tattoos, I think they might have said, 'Because he is kind of dirty,' or something like that. But then they send out another group of dirt bags to go out to the site, you know. So it is an obvious thing. (Dylan)

Dylan's tattoos created a situation which gave him some direct experience with an important, and often hidden, dimension of society. The discrimination Dylan felt, due to his tattoos, became a vehicle encouraging awareness of domination and social inequality. This discrimination was an unanticipated consequence of acquiring the tattoos. In this case, inflexibility of style is enhanced since the tattoos are positioned in public places on Dylan's body, making them almost impossible to cover up. At first, he tried to ignore the discrimination:

I just kind of do what I want and I really do not let other things like that get in the way [referring to his experiences of discrimination]. When I was getting tattooed a lot when I was younger, it was like, 'Well, I play rock-n-roll. I am in bands and that is like all I am going to do for the rest of my life.' (Dylan)

In time, he could no longer ignore the discrimination. Rather than trying to cover up his tattoos, or feel stigmatized, Dylan began to acquire more, but this time in the context of social critique. In the excerpt below, he discusses one of his tattoos that originally was intended to signify social criticism.

Dylan: It is like an upside-down champagne glass [referring to the tattoo on his wrist], it is kind of an anti-rich people thing. The funny thing is, my friend did not make the lines of the champagne pouring out of the bottle too good, so it looks like its foaming. So it is kind of like, 'Let's party!' instead of, 'Fuck the rich.'

I: What brought about these feelings of anti-rich?

Dylan: It is just a complete imbalance of money that is going on. I am not an angry guy, but there is no reason for say like those physical plant guys who haul bricks all day to get paid \$6.50 an hour, okay this is like a small example of the world, like this university. The Chancellor makes \$230,000. Larry the bricklayer makes \$6.50 an hour and is also getting fired in six months. This goes on everywhere. It is just an extreme imbalance.

The meaning of Dylan's tattoos began in the context of social integration. Both the act of acquiring tattoos, as well as the designs, became symbols of bonding and conforming to his primary group. Then, as the cultural context changed for Dylan, he found that his tattoos caused a negative social reaction that was stigmatizing. Dylan began to realize that he was unable to control the meanings associated with his tattoos. As soon as he was outside the context of his primary group, interpretation of his tattoos became unpredictable. Again, meaning arises in the interaction between the individual actor and the social structures that combine to create a context for this actor. Whereas Jenny and Mike struggled to change themselves in order to remove the stigma and adapt to the new context, Dylan believes that the stigma is a form of discrimination and that the structure needs to be changed. Thus, he expresses this belief with the aesthetic resource he feels most familiar and comfortable with; Dylan begins to acquire tattoos as an act of resistance, selecting designs that communicate social critique. Interestingly, when these tattoos are combined with the other tattoos, it creates a rather uninterpretable pastiche of designs and images. The meanings of the individual tattoos do not allow Dylan to critique and change structure. However, continuing to acquire tattoos in the face of discrimination does help him to defend his identity, he simply rejects the audience. Dylan is constructing a body project that helps him to feel free and empowered, and this provides the experience of stopping oppression.

It's like you have done this extreme; it's a freedom thing. It is totally liberating. It's like. Fuck, I can do whatever I want. I can do this. I can still do whatever I want in

this society and I am going to be completely covered in art, it makes everything else stop. (Dylan)

In this case, “everything else” is the discrimination Dylan experiences in his day-to-day life. Being “completely covered in art” gives him the sense that his body project is his own, freeing him from discrimination and therefore making it “stop.” Thus, making “everything else stop” is a way for Dylan to fight for the freedom to negotiate his identity and confront the oppression of his everyday life. /

Rachel: Decorating the Temple

→ Rachel is a 23-year-old single mother who currently lives at home with her seven-year-old daughter, mother, and father. For the last five years she has managed an exotic boutique that sells funky shoes and clothing, lingerie, novelty gifts, jewelry, body piercing, and adult sex items. Rachel’s narrative creates an incredible tension between stability and instability. On the one hand, Rachel’s childhood is almost storybook. She grew up in a close-knit Mormon family with an older brother and sister, caring and supportive parents, resources, and time together. As a sign of stability, Rachel was even raised in the same house her mother was raised in. She still talks about her parents as being kind and helpful, contributing child support when Rachel is working. On the other hand, Rachel’s life can be described as a chaotic struggle, often plunging her into crisis. She is attracted to what she describes as “jailhouse,” “ghetto,” or “bad,” men; became pregnant at 15; a single mom at 16; has filled her body with tattoos and piercings (including ears, lip, and clitoris), and manages a boutique that is regularly picketed. Rachel’s personal myth is about asserting creative control over her body as an inspired expression of salvation from personal crisis. The word “salvation” is used in her myth because so many of her tattoos were inspired by sacred beliefs and ideas.

The first author arranged a meeting at a local coffee shop for the interview. Rachel arrives wearing a jean jacket over a black tank camisole that shows off her many tattoos. She has on faded blue jeans and black large soled shoes that make her appear even taller. Rachel is tall with a curvy build and has short brown hair that is asymmetrical with deep red highlights that are thick and chunky. She is enthusiastic, smiles, and pushes her hair behind her ears revealing multiple piercings and ear lobes stretched to hold large silver disks about the size of a dime. Rachel also has a silver dart pierced through the skin just under her lower lip. She was easy to talk to and clearly enjoyed sharing her story.

Rachel began the interview by showing off her tattoos. On her back, between her shoulder blades, she has a large Celtic knot. On her left arm she has a complete sleeve down past her elbow. Rachel refers to this arm as her "feminine sleeve" consisting of her daughter's name, a cupid doll, a rose, a winged heart, the words "Queen of hearts," and a star on her wrist. On her right arm she has a rocker skull embedded in a rose, a heart, a purple rose on her elbow, and another star on her wrist. On her chest, Rachel has three Catholic symbols: praying hands, a sacred heart, and two large swallows. In addition, she has the word "family" tattooed on one side of her chest and "friends" on the other side. Rachel has a large lotus flower on her stomach symbolizing creation and the word "mother" on her lower back. The word "mother" uses an art deco floral design in the style of the Moravian artist Mucha. Finally, on Rachel's leg she has three large chimpanzee heads with the see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil faces.

Rachel's story begins at 13 when her sister, unexpectedly, arrives home with a tattoo:

My older sister is 28, we're pretty close, she has one tattoo and I don't know if she'll ever get anymore. She got hers right at 18, just to do it. This was before I even thought about doing it, you know. I remember when she came home with it and my mom was having a fit and I was just like, 'How did you get a tattoo?' (Rachel)

Two years later, at 15, Rachel fell in love with Kevin, the father of her daughter. Kevin is five years older than Rachel, Scottish, and covered with crude, badge-like tattoos. Rachel was very attracted to his rebellious image and her first tattoo, the Celtic knot, commemorates their relationship and daughter.

I just thought it was the coolest thing, my bad-boy boyfriend. If my daughter had Kevin's last name it would be McClure. He is pretty true to his family background and traditions and everything and at that point in my life I was still hung up on him and that's basically why I got the Celtic knot, because of him. He was a major part of my life, you know what I mean, and he was pretty heavily tattooed when I met him so that is kind of what got me interested. (Rachel)

Although Rachel's sister opened the door of possibility and Kevin motivated her interest, it was Wendy who taught her that tattoos did not have to be crude; they could be a feminine form of artistic expression.

Rachel: I never really wanted to get tattoos in the beginning when I met all of those people because they were sort of ghetto, I hate to say jailhouse slickin ya know.

I: Ghetto?

Rachel: Like somebody did them in their basement or something, yeah, totally white trash. But then I met my friend Wendy.

I: Who's this?

Rachel: This is the girl that I went with to get my first tattoo; hers were like really pretty and she had a lot of color, so that's what made me like, 'Wow, I can get tattoos that are gonna be better than theirs.' Mine will be so much nicer so that's how it all kind of started.

Wendy helped Rachel discover a feminine form of expression with tattoos but it was Kevin's lifestyle and persona that was still the most important influence. Specifically, his adherence to a philosophy that was popular among youth in the 1990s called "straight-edge." In the excerpt below, Rachel begins by referring to Kevin's peer group.

Rachel: He was another one of those guys that was friends with Kevin.

I: Can you tell me about that group?

Rachel: Straight-edge boys. Straight-edge is, um, drug-free, like the drug-free youth, they have their own movement. They are all into the same types of things like tattoos. And they kind of force their views on other people by beating them up and stuff, you know, it was like the bad boys so to me that was cool.

I: So you were attracted to that?

Rachel: I didn't like drugs and everything anyways so I just kind of felt like you shouldn't smoke and drink and do things like that to your body but then at the same time they were tattooing their body.

I: Interesting.

Rachel: Yeah, and a lot of the kids were vegan, I'm actually vegan, so that kind of goes along with the whole tattoo community too.

The phrase "straight-edge" was actually coined by Ian MacKaye of the punk rock band Minor Threat in the early 1980s. MacKaye was reacting to the nihilistic tendencies of punk rock and promoted instead a philosophy of "don't drink/don't smoke/don't fuck." While the original philosophy promoted a drug free lifestyle, modern interpretations embrace a vegan activism with increasing involvement in environmental and political issues. During the 1990s, straight-edge became associated by the mainstream with the intolerant views of an aggressive subculture. Interestingly, although Rachel by this time had rejected her Mormon socialization, it may have been this background that made her feel comfortable with some aspects of straight-edge. The Mormon religion teaches that your body is a temple, a precious gift from God. Given that it is the individual's responsibility to care for this gift, one should eat properly, exercise, and abstain from the use of tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea, and illegal drugs. It is this philosophy of the body,

which justified her mother's resistance and negative social reaction to tattoos. From the perspective of Rachel's parents, tattoos desecrate the temple. When comparing this religion to straight-edge, we do not mean to suggest that Mormons are intolerant and violent; this was something that was specific to some of the members of the straight-edge group. In fact, it was the violence that eventually led to Rachel's breakup with Kevin. Rachel chose to end her relationship with Kevin before he learned of her pregnancy.

Not long after the breakup with Kevin, Rachel found herself in another serious relationship. Unfortunately, this relationship also ended badly. Since this boyfriend was Catholic, Rachel's praying hands, sacred heart, and sparrows all symbolize this relationship. At about the same time, Rachel's pregnancy was beginning to show and she decided to transfer to a special high school for teenage mothers. This was a small school of about 40 students who brought their babies and young children to class. Although this was somewhat isolating, it provided Rachel with the opportunity to learn how to care for her baby and to complete her high school education. This was a low point in Rachel's narrative:

[Referring to one of her heart tattoos] This one's broken, my broken heart. I got that one after a lot of really rough stuff happened in my life with Kevin and then I also dated another guy and that was a really serious relationship, and it ended really poorly. So it was just like a lot of stuff had gone pretty bad so that's how I felt at the time. (Rachel)

Rachel's narrative describes a struggle to find love and creative freedom. It has been a struggle since, until recently, each time she asserted her independence she would liberate herself into a new form of regulation. For instance, although she loves her parents, the cultural context of a conservative Mormon family was too constraining. When Rachel was old enough to make her own decisions, she therefore liberated herself from the church and developed a new lifestyle with Kevin. Yet, the straight-edge/vegan ideology ended up being just as regulating, ironically in many of the same ways as the Mormon religion. Then, when Rachel broke up with Kevin and liberated herself from straight-edge, she found herself in a special school for pregnant teenagers and mothers with young children. Again, this environment was somewhat confining, removing college as an easy option and restricting her freedom.

Rachel's tattoos represent a form of unregulated creative expression. This can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim some control of her body. The Mormon religion, straight-edge, veganism, and her special school are all regulating her body. Rachel's tattoos represent a public and artistic way of stating that she is in charge of her body project. The exotic boutique she

manages specializes in visceral experiences, both in terms of adornment and sexuality. For Rachel, this environment liberates the body, removing conservative regulations. In this experiential context, Rachel seizes the creative freedom to move from crisis to a more rewarding sense of self and identification. Her plans are to continue working at the boutique, exploring, experiencing, and decorating her body. /

Steve: Seeking Loyalty and Purpose

Steve is 38 years old and single. He is divorced and shares custody of his four-year-old daughter. Steve currently works as a medical courier for a university hospital, delivering medicine and supplies to people who were just released. His personal myth reflects a journey to resolve the tension between an idealistic image of his father and the rebellious chaos of his own life. Steve's image of his father appears in his narrative as a warrior imago. This imago is described as a powerful hero, loyal and focused on an important purpose. Since Steve's father left his family when he was 11, this imago represents the ideal father he never had. The warrior imago stands in stark contrast to the reality of his circumstances. For most of his life, Steve rejected authority, created chaos, became an alcoholic, and eventually ended up in jail. He describes the rebellious music of heavy metal bands such as Iron Maidens and Arch Enemy as symbols of this part of his story.

Steve arrives for the interview wearing frayed blue jeans, brown work boots, and a white long-john shirt under a black t-shirt that has the logo of a heavy metal band. He is tall, thin, and unshaven, wears stylish glasses, and has short black hair that he wears spiked. Steve has a hoarse voice, which echoes his rough appearance. He begins the interview by describing his tattoos. Steve has one entire arm covered in what appears to be a continuous mix of color and images. The images on this arm begin with a Samurai on his shoulder and continue down his arm with two more Samurais holding swords. These warriors symbolize loyalty, discipline, dedication, focus, and common purpose. Continuing down the arm is an axe murderer in flames, which he took from a Malice album cover, and a creative wristband of flames. On his other arm, Steve has an Egyptian falcon, an Egyptian eye, a black tribal band around his bicep, and two logos taken from heavy metal albums (Prong and Blue Oyster Cult). On his chest, he has a large cross decorated with roses that represents the Knight warriors and the crusades. On Steve's legs, he has several large tattoos including an axe, the letter "S" and an eagle icon from the band Saxon, a roman symbol and band logo

from an Arch Enemy album, and finally, an 11-point star from another heavy metal band logo that represents the pagan movement.

An important turning point in Steve's narrative was the divorce of his parents. Due to religious differences, his father left the family when he was 11.

I: What kind of childhood did you have?

Steve: Pretty good middle class childhood but my parents got divorced when I was 11 and I took that really hard. I was a really good student up till probably the end of junior high, then I rebelled you know, I grew my hair long, got into heavy metal, started drinking, and smoked pot. My high school years were kind of lost, I wasn't a happy kid and I didn't apply myself.

In high school, Steve used drinking as a tool for social integration.

In high school we would try and have a keg everyday and we were throwing kegs for the seniors when I was a sophomore. That's what I liked about drinking, it allowed me to fit in all groups. I was not an athlete but I was a good enough athlete to be on the outskirts of the athletes. I was a partier so I could fit in with the partiers, like whatever, not the mainstream but I was smart enough I could fit in with them. It was just helping me fit in with everything, it was a tool ya know. (Steve)

After high school, Steve desperately wanted to leave home but was running out of options. He decided to enlist in the Navy and was stationed in San Diego for the next three years. Steve acquired his first tattoo at 21; he had just toured an Egyptian exhibit and was impressed by the exotic power, grandeur, and mystery of ancient Egypt. At about the same time, one of his favorite heavy metal bands, Iron Maiden, had just come out with an album using Egyptian imagery and themes. Thus, Steve's first tattoo was an Egyptian falcon. In the next few years he continued to accumulate tattoos; most of these were related, in some way, to the warrior theme. It was a combination of losing his father, the Navy, the exotic intrigue of ancient Egypt, and the agentic power of heavy metal that helped to form the warrior imago. This imago represents loyalty and purpose, things that were, at the time, lacking in Steve's life.

Just the power of warriors and I think the hero aspect I identified with a lot like the Knights is what I think I really identified with in the beginning. Then the more I looked into the oriental, the Japanese Samurai, I just really identified with the loyalty and the common purpose, and mainly the loyalty to their cause and just the, it's like their main reason for being, just the dedication of it. I really thought that was cool. I really thought today's society was without focus and loyalty. (Steve)

The warrior imago personifies an idealized characterization of masculinity. Storytellers such as Bly (1992), father of what he has called "the expressive

men's movement," believe that many men have been cut off from their fathers and from an archetypal masculinity celebrated in ancient myth (McAdams, 1993). Echoing Bly's claim, Keen (1992), in *Fire in the Belly* argues that "dad" is no longer present to teach his sons how to become men, each man must therefore learn how to define manhood for himself. Drawing on classical tales of male heroism such as the Knights of the Round Table, Bly and Keen challenge men to explore the nuances of their own experience seeking meaning, purpose, and passion. In the excerpt below, Steve recalls an early experience before his dad left the family. /

I remember in boy scouts, my dad, we did some things with knives and my dad made me a bow ax out of wood and I just thought it was so cool and I always wanted to be like a Knight in the old days and storm the castle and wear armor and get the girl. (Steve)

Although the warrior imago was important to Steve as he left the Navy at 23, he had yet to find loyalty and purpose. For the next seven years he worked odd jobs, mainly in bars, and drank heavily; he had lost control of his life. Then at 30, Steve finally hits rock bottom: while being stopped for a DUI, he begins to fight with the police and ends up badly hurt and in jail. Coincidentally, the fight begins due to a comment made about his tattoos.

I got picked up by the police for reckless driving, DUI, and I had the outline of this tattoo and the cops saw it and said something like, "What, do you like to draw on yourself, punk;" and I'm just like, "Fuck you, I feel sorry for your wife cause she has to fuck you every night." And then he bounced my head off the cop car and started throwing me around. (Steve)

Steve ended up beaten and after seven days in jail vowed, "no more."

With the help of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Steve was sober by 32 and began what he hoped would lead to more meaningful work by doing odd jobs in hospitals. One year later he married a woman he met at AA and they had a daughter soon after. Sadly, he was divorced after a year due to "religious differences." Steve's work in hospitals paid off; eventually he was offered a position as a medical courier delivering supplies to the sick. He likes this job and feels that it is important. Steve is currently 38, has stopped creating chaos in his life, is friends with his ex-wife, and is a dedicated and loyal father to his daughter. He has in many ways filled the promise of his warrior imago, dedication, loyalty, and sense of purpose. Steve continues to attend AA meetings three or four times a week and describes his struggle to stay sober as a "fight," a courageous battle of choice and self-understanding.

NARRATING THE TATTOO: REDEMPTION VERSUS CONTAMINATION

It has become common in cultural studies to suggest that the only thing that remains the same is change. Whether we are talking about politics, the economy, computer technology, globalization, or fashion, we continue to be struck by how rapid and unpredictable change can be. Consumer culture reflects this situation; consumers adapt to changes by varying their lifestyle. Consumers downshift, upgrade, change their hair, body, clothes, car, house, career, geographic location, and even family. Concepts like fragmentation, complexity, mutability, and disassociation have become popular when describing the loss of personal anchors needed for identity. Tattoos are an interesting case because they run counter to this theme. The popularity of tattoos reflects a need for stability, predictability, permanence, and identity. For some consumers, it is an attempt to mark the self at its very moment of disappearance. Thus, exploring our informants' use of tattoos helps to better understand the role of consumption as a means to construct identity.

The study of tattoo consumption opposes traditional forms of consumer research in at least three ways. First, most approaches to consumer research assume easy acquisition and disposition of the object. For example, one buys a Benetton sweater, wears it when appropriate, and when it is no longer in fashion, one gives it away, sells it at a garage sale, or stacks it in their closet with their other out-of-style items. Tattoos, on the other hand, are not easily acquired or disposed of. Acquisition involves a painful ritual that may take hours. This ritual itself becomes part of the object since the experience adds meaning and becomes embodied in the tattoo. Most consumers view tattoos as permanent; they can be removed but it is painful, expensive, and scarring. Second, most approaches to consumer research assume homogeneous objects that are then personalized by the consumer. All consumers have access to the same Ford 150, for instance, over time the truck is broken-in, becomes familiar, and eventually cathected with personal meaning. However, every tattoo is unique from the beginning; it is an interaction of the symbol, the artist, the place on the body, and the type of body. Tattoos also may fade over time and appear different as the body changes. Finally, more conventional perspectives assume that objects remain separate from the body. Even food is analyzed as separate from the body since it is quickly metabolized and disposed of (Evers, 2001). Some interesting ideas have been proposed as to how the object becomes part of the subject such as Belk's (1988) *extended self* concept; however, these theories are thought provoking because we still assume that the object is separate from the body. Tattoos actually change the

skin and therefore become a permanent part of the body. It is because tattoos are permanent, infinitely customized, and destabilize object/body oppositions that they come to represent the way people make meaning of their lives. This meaning-making centrally involves storytelling; the construction and sharing of stories of the self.

The stories we make and tell about our own lives contribute to our identities. Tattoos often symbolize fundamental beliefs that situate a story within a cultural context. In this way, tattoos contribute to the ideological setting of one's personal myth. The ideological setting provides the backdrop of beliefs and values upon which the plot of a life story can unfold. Since ideological statements may be contested, tattoos often provoke strong social reactions. This is important given that identification depends, in part, on social recognition. For example, if the social reaction to the tattoo is consistent with the individual's interpretation, their personal myth is reinforced and one finds meaning and identification. On the other hand, if the social reaction is negative, the tattoo becomes an initiating event that destabilizes the personal myth. This destabilization process often leads to stigma and shame, demanding a reinterpretation and reformulation of the personal myth. These two situations, identification versus stigma, often lead to very different narrative sequences.

Analyzing across the seven cases to discover common story lines that may help us better understand identity construction, a recurrent thematic trend involves positive versus negative outcomes of having tattoos. For some of the informants, their tattoos symbolize their journey of moving forward or making progress. Jewel, Jack, Rachel, and Steve were able to move their narrative from an emotionally negative or bad scene to an emotionally positive or good outcome. This is a narrative sequence of *redemption*, moving from bad to good (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Jenny, Mike, and Dylan's tattoos symbolize the reverse movement, from good to bad. This is a *contamination* sequence; an emotionally positive or good experience is spoiled or contaminated by an emotionally negative or bad outcome (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Thus, for each informant, their tattoos represent patterns of redemption or contamination (see Table 1).

These life-narrative accounts are especially useful in accounting for life transitions or turning points. It is these transitions that can help us better understand identity construction and negotiation. Redemption sequences can be used to chart a progressive understanding of self; the self as growing, learning, or recovering over time. In contrast, contamination sequences express frustrations, decline, or stagnation; the self becomes blocked and is therefore unable to progress.

Table 1. Description of Informants, Personal Myth, and Narrative Sequence.

Pseudonym	Title of Case	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Hometown	Occupation	No. of Years Tattooed
Jewel	Dreaming of healing through crisis	28	F	Single	Monroe, Louisiana	Student and waitress	8
Jack	Working through crisis	58	M	Widowed	Spring Valley, Illinois	Professor of criminal justice	5
Jenny	Coping with stigma	44	F	Married	Van Buren, Arkansas	Adjunct professor in sociology	24
Mike	Surviving a double-life	36	M	Married	Midland, Michigan	Artist and delivers flowers	18
Dylan	Fighting for freedom	22	M	Single	Pittsburg, Kansas	Musician, construction worker, and student	6
Rachel	Decorating the temple	23	F	Single	West Jordan, Utah	Manager of exotic boutique	8
Steve	Seeking Loyalty and purpose	38	M	Divorced	Salt Lake City, Utah	Medical courier for university hospital	17
Pseudonym	Personal Myth		Narrative Sequence				
Jewel	Using art and her creative imagination to transcend and heal the grief she feels from her parents' death		Redemption				
Jack	Using Native American imagery to find distinction as a way of working through an identity crisis		Redemption				
Jenny	Tells the story of a survivor, hanging on to counterculture idealism, but needing a persona that blends with the professional woman, juggling career, kids, and marriage		Contamination				
Mike	Using his body to construct a deviant persona of armor, which later he comes to regret		Contamination				
Dylan	The creation of an empowering body project that represents an expression of resistance		Contamination				
Rachel	Asserting creative control over her body as an inspired expression of salvation from personal crisis		Redemption				
Steve	Reflects a journey to resolve the tension between an idealistic image of his father and the rebellious chaos of his own life		Redemption				

All redemption sequences involve, at an earlier point in time, contamination. For Jewel and Jack, contamination resulted from the death of loved ones. These deaths were uncontrollable and they set in motion a redemption sequence of learning and growth. Jewel's story was about using her art and creative imagination to transcend and heal the grief she felt from her parents' deaths. Nearly all of her tattoos, from the circle of flowers, to the Luna moth, to the serpent, are symbols of this journey. Jewel's tattoos are therefore a sign of turning a negative experience into something positive: "I needed something to take me beyond the grief. Some symbol of beauty. When I'm naked and I'm looking at myself, I'm looking beyond my physicality into what I have gone through. I see body art as my road map" (Jewel). Jack's story was about connecting to Native American imagery to work through an identity crisis. This crisis resulted from unsettling changes in his life after the death of his wife. These changes in lifestyle generated deep reflection about who he was; resulting in reevaluation and the discovery of new anchors of identification. Jack's tattoos were an important part of this process: "... when you start getting the second and third tattoo, it really does become more personalized. It becomes an idea that it is more of a reflection of who you think you are" (Jack). Like Jewel, he was able to grow in ways that may not have been possible or predicted before the crisis.

For Rachel and Steve, contamination resulted from self-precipitated recklessness. This recklessness set in motion a different type of redemption sequence involving sacrifice and recovery. Unlike the deaths discussed in the previous paragraph, this type of self-sabotage was controllable. Rachel and Steve struggled to undo the problems and suffering caused by their own actions. In time, they were able to improve or redeem the situation and move forward in a positive way. In both stories, their tattoos became a symbol of this redemption. Rachel's story involved asserting creative control over her body as an inspired expression of salvation from personal crisis; by becoming pregnant so young, Rachel sacrificed college and other opportunities for learning and growth. In addition, by becoming involved with a series of men that were not committed to the relationship, she was continually hurt and taken advantage of. Rachel's tattoos mark her recovery from this situation. Her Celtic knot, feminine sleeve, lotus flower, and "mother" all represent coming to terms with her sacrifice and recovery. Rachel's praying hands, sacred heart, and two large swallows on her chest encode the sequence of early suffering followed by a promised recovery or deliverance to a positive-affect state. Her love for her daughter, stable job, and good relationship with her parents have become positive anchors for identification. Steve's story is about coming to terms with his father leaving

at an early age and the ensuing destructive wake of trouble, which was the reality of his life. The initiating event leading to contamination was his parents' divorce, which like the deaths discussed above, was uncontrollable. However, the low point in Steve's life, from which the redemption sequence begins, was the result of his own actions. His tattoos mark both the contamination and the path to redemption. The heavy metal tattoos are symbols of Steve's rebellious life-out-of-control situation. His military experience, inability to hold down a job, and alcoholism, are continually discussed in the context of heavy metal culture and music. His Knight warrior and Samurai tattoos represent what he would like to become: focused, strong, loyal, and filled with purpose. Eventually, Steve completes the journey; his friendship with his ex-wife, relationship with his daughter, AA, and job delivering medical supplies have created positive and meaningful sites for identification.

Whereas redemption sequences help to produce a progressive narrative of self, contamination sequences suggest that progress has stalled, resulting in stagnated life plots (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Jenny's narrative is a good example of a contamination sequence. Jenny has become fixated on others' interpretation of her tattoo. This has prevented her from moving forward and developing in a way that she would interpret as positive and progressive. The original context of Jenny's marijuana leaf tattoo was affectively positive, marking her solidarity with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, over time, as Jenny moved into more conservative suburban middle-class roles, her tattoo became stigmatizing, leading to shame and regret: "I don't feel good about having this big marijuana leaf on my back. I just think that anything that I add to my appearance of deviance, I worry about that. I'm not real comfortable with it" (Jenny). Her story illustrates the ways identity is ultimately rooted in forms of social organization and institutions. Although identity exists as a product of imagination, it is also the result of what is consensually validated. Identity exists, therefore, as a complex relationship between a cultural context and how the individual chooses to remember and understand particular events. Jenny's contamination sequence provides an opportunity to study how interpretations of "real" events of the past have come to shape her adaptation to the present. What started out as passionate and exciting ended up frustrating and constraining.

Mike and Dylan's contamination sequences are similar to Jenny's. Mike's tattoos were acquired in the context of armor, helping him construct a tough and scary persona. This seemed to work for Mike, freeing him from the assaults of his classmate bullies. However, over time, this deviant persona

became stigmatizing, contaminating his self-conceptions as a middle-class husband and father. Dylan's tattoos were acquired in the context of acting in harmony with his punk rock band. This was positively described as one of the happiest times in his life. Again, we find the same contamination sequence; since tattoos are difficult to dispose of, customized according to the context, and become part of the body, they may become problematic as the individual moves their narrative forward. Dylan's tattoos are so visible they compromise appropriate norms for appearance in nearly every social context. This has made it difficult for him to progress: "He would not let me wait tables. He would tell me flat out, 'You are too tattooed. This is a family restaurant.' I called the NAACP and left a message saying that I had been discriminated against" (Dylan). /

CONCLUSION

As our analyses reveal, identity is an ongoing negotiation between the individual who chooses to narrate particular scenes and the culture within which the individual lives. Redemption and contamination sequences, as a common story line across our informants, helped us better understand the long-term consequences of tattoos and their role in the negotiation process. The final step of the hermeneutic circle involves connecting this theme to broader historical and cultural questions. The redemption versus contamination theme links identity negotiation to cultural perceptions of the sacred and other metanarratives of modernity.

Although the importance of the sacred in consumer behavior has been discussed since 1989 (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), the topic has not been developed in the context of personal myth or identity. Myth and religion often use a redemption story instrumentally to inspire hope. For example, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell (1972) discusses the *hero myth*: the individual separates from their homeland, travels far, endures hardship, bravely confronts the enemy, acquires meaning or the elixir of life, and journeys back to the homeland as the hero. In so many ways this tells the story of our four informants that fit the redemption category. Our three informants that currently fit the contamination category may one day move forward in meaningful ways, also redeeming themselves. William James (1902/1958) wrote that nearly all world religions begin with an initial sense that something is wrong followed by salvation or deliverance. Judaeo-Christian traditions are replete with redemption stories. The Arabic term "Islam" means *surrender*, as in surrendering to the ultimate will

of Allah to be purified and redeemed. In Hinduism and Buddhism, redemption sequences take the form of liberation and freedom (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Contamination sequences are also rooted in ancient sources such as the myth of Icarus. Icarus was the son of Daedalus. When these two were imprisoned, the father constructed wings and they both were able to escape. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too high; however, intoxicated by the glorious feeling of flight he rose higher and higher. Eventually Icarus flew too close to the Sun melting the wax holding the feathers on his wings; he fell into the sea and drowned (May, 1980). The lessons of the Icarus myth include learning self-control once free of a restriction, remaining open to advice, and learning to be aware of when a situation begins to spiral out of control. One only needs to watch *Behind the Music* on VH1 to hear similar stories of ascent and failure.

Redemption sequences also play an important role in the metanarratives of modernity. From the structural-functionalism of Durkheim (1933) to Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action we find an embedded assumption of progress. Hegel's dialectic is a good example: thesis–antithesis–synthesis. Many of the more interesting critiques of reason and modernity address directly this theme. For instance, in *The Fall* (1957/1991), Camus argues that believing in redemption is its own contamination. Redemption for Camus is living the lucid life, which means there is no redemption, just existence and what we do with it, what we make of it (Fisher, 2004). Two poststructural theorists, Deleuze and Guattari (1987), suggest something similar by arguing that the discourses of modernity have an orgasmic orientation. These theories are designed to add up to something, they gain momentum and are ultimately dissipated in a redemptive climax. Instead, these theorists propose *plateaus* designed to raise the level of thought to a certain intensity without a clear system of belief or architecture of propositions. Only *nomad thought* or a thousand plateaus that add up to nothing will resist and survive a poststructural critique.

These types of poststructural theories and critiques have not been helpful when analyzing our informants' use of tattoos as one part of their struggle for identity. It is clear that our informants were organizing their storytelling around decidedly modern themes. They are each working through transitions, weaving personal events into unified stories that include not only a tapestry of the past but also anticipations of a better future. The limitation of this research is that one product category is discussed in the context of the informants' personal myths. Clearly, other irrevocable consumption decisions are important in forging one's narrative. Future research should therefore broaden the approach taken here by analyzing those moments in

consumer culture when people must contend with irrevocable, or nearly irrevocable, decisions. For example, the decision to go to a particular college, or not to go to college at all, the big commercial wedding, the big mortgage, a downshift in consumption, to move into managed care or a nursing home, are all difficult decisions to change once a commitment has been made. Like tattoos, these types of consumption decisions are often symbolic of life transitions and therefore play an important role in identity negotiation.

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