

An Exploratory Investigation of Identity Negotiation and Tattoo Removal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates tattoo removal as a means of identity negotiation using Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory as the conceptual foundation. Twenty-two informants who ranged in age from 19 to 43 participated in in-depth interviews telling their stories of tattoo acquisition and removal. Findings unpack the relationship between consumption, disposition, and the different aspects of the self-concept. Informants who felt overly individuated (or assimilated) in a frequently activated social identity group because of tattoo acquisition, compensated for this conflict by enhancing feelings of affiliation (or differentiation) in another frequently activated social identity via tattoo removal. This study extends previous research on the role of consumption in shaping the maintenance and development of the self-concept.

Keywords: Tattoo removal, social identity, optimal distinctiveness, disposition, assimilation, differentiation, self-concept

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Consumption choices affect how others view the individual consumer, which influences her decision-making. Less obvious, but no less important, is that consumption choices also affect how the consumer views herself (Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979), another factor that influences decision-making (e.g., Belk 1988; Schouten 1991; Solomon 1983). Recent research in consumer behavior has begun to explore the effect of product disposition on the consumer's self-concept (e.g., Kates 2001; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Young 1991). McAlexander (1991), for example, found that during a divorce people will dispose of objects associated with their former partner as a method of "breaking free." The present study explores how consumers' disposition decisions are tied to their self-concepts within the domain of tattoo removal.

Tattoo removal provides a relevant context for exploring how identity negotiation motivates disposition. Because a tattoo is part of a person's physical body, it may have a stronger influence on the self-concept when compared to the typical external possession (cf., McClelland 1951; Prelinger 1959). Furthermore, an originally designed tattoo represents a possession in which the consumer invests significant time and effort in creating the design. Such personal investments may translate into a deeper connection between the possession and the self-concept (cf. McClelland 1951; Prelinger 1959; Sartre 1943). In addition, the consumer may make an even greater personal investment (i.e., financially and psychologically) to remove a tattoo when compared to the disposal of a typical external possession because tattoo removal is expensive, painful, and may not be completely successful (i.e., scars). Finally, tattoo removal is a relatively permanent form of disposition because it involves intentional destruction compared to the more porous selling or giving away of a possession (e.g., Kates 2001; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price et al. 2000; Young 1991). Therefore, tattoo removal serves as fertile ground for examining the identity-related motivations for disposition.

The purpose of the present investigation is to examine disposition as a means of identity negotiation using Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory as the conceptual foundation. This study unpacks the relationship between disposition and the different aspects of the self-concept. After a brief review of research identifying the reasons consumers have for acquiring and removing tattoos, this paper discusses optimal distinctiveness theory, followed by an overview of the method, key findings, and a discussion of the study's implications.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Motives for tattoo acquisition and removal. Historically in the United States tattooing is perceived as a mark of social deviance associated with bikers, sailors, convicts, gang members and prostitutes (DeMello 2000; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1989). Within the last two decades, however, the meaning of tattoos has begun to morph as the activity has spread into mainstream society. Tattooing now represents a legitimate art form, practiced by trained artists on members of middle-class society (DeMello 2000).

Research finds that mainstream consumers have a wide variety of reasons for being tattooed. Table 1 presents a summary of motives for tattoo acquisition that research has uncovered. Collectively, the reasons for tattoo acquisition seem to be methods of influencing the self-concept (Sanders 1989). Furthermore, these motivations appear consistent with those from research on defining the self via symbolic consumption (e.g., Belk 1988).

The most commonly reported reason to obtain a tattoo is to enhance one's sense of individuality (DeMello 2000). For example, some people use their tattoo as a personal narrative to commemorate an event or significant period in their life (Velliquette, Murray, and Creyer 1998), such as celebrating an accomplishment of the bearer (Gritton 1988). Others use a tattoo as a symbol representing some aspect of their personal identity, such as a nickname, an animal, or a hobby (Sanders 1989; Velliquette et al. 1998). Furthermore, a person may choose to individuate herself as an act of rebellion.

TABLE 1
Reasons to Acquire or Remove a Tattoo¹

Reasons for tattoo acquisition ²	Reasons for tattoo removal
(D) Commemorate life event	(D) Sever ties with previous life period
(D) Symbol of personal identity	(D) Loss of art value or uniqueness
(D) Statement of spirituality	(D) Peer pressure in purchase decision
(D) Control over the body	(D) Impression management
(D) Rebellion	(A) Conformity
(D) Body aesthetics	(A) Repair body aesthetics
(A) Mark group affiliation	(D) End group affiliation
(A) Relationship vow	(D) End of relationship
(A) Initiation rite	(A) Social rejection
(A) Conformity	(A) Family pressure

According to DeMello (2000) tattoos also symbolize a personal connection to higher powers. For example, popular tribal tattoos are often self-designed by the consumer. The process of design, the tribal symbolism, and the acquisition process, come together to represent a personal ritual that in turn develops a deeper connection to the spiritual sense of self. Similarly, some consumers view their tattoo as an outward expression of the personal control they have over their body, while others cite empowerment and personal growth as chief motivations for obtaining tattoos. In these cases, the tattoo serves as a symbol of the person's feeling of a heightened sense of control over the self and may even accompany positive changes in lifestyle (e.g., being drug free; DeMello 2000). A tattoo may also enhance a person's body aesthetic. Besides cosmetic tattooing, which applies ink as a form of permanent makeup, tattoos themselves may be used to hide a scar or simply draw attention to a particular body part (Sanders 1989).

Tattoos may also communicate social aspects of a person's identity. Tattoos can be a marker of group membership, such as a fraternity (Sanders 1989). In other cases the individual may acquire a tattoo as a prerequisite for group membership, as is the case of group initiation rituals. In fact, as the tattoo culture becomes more mainstream (DeMello 1995), a person may get a tattoo as an act of conformity. Finally, personal relationships also serve as a common reason to get a tattoo. These tattoos are usually the name of a person's romantic partner and serve as a symbol of the wearer's devotion to the relationship (Sanders 1989), and are more common among women (Watson 1998).

Despite the increasing ubiquity of tattooing, the acquisition process does contain risk. There is physiological risk because tattooing is somewhat painful and there is a slight risk of contracting a disease (e.g., Long and Rickman 1994). There is also psychological risk because the tattoo could result in negative social reactions or not be what the customer desired (e.g., low quality). Finally, there is financial risk because tattooing is rather expensive. Regardless of the risks, many consumers make impulsive decisions to be tattooed without much knowledge about the process or the ramifications of their decision (Sanders 1988). An impulsive decision could lead to buyer's remorse. Although several researchers have investigated consumer's reasons for acquiring a tattoo, little research explores consumer regret after obtaining an initial tattoo.

Sanders (1985) found approximately 33% of tattoo consumers ($n = 163$) experienced regret after their purchase. Only two studies have explored why some consumers ultimately had their tattoo removed. Armstrong et al.

¹ Derived from the literature. Arguably, these reasons are not mutually exclusive. For example, it could be argued that impression management could also drive acquisition.

² (D): Reason activating goal of differentiation. (A): Reason activating goal of assimilation.

(1996) surveyed 105 participants and the most common reasons given were: to help me feel better about myself; tired of the tattoo; be more credible with friends; prevent people judging based on the tattoo; separate from previous life experiences; and remove a label associated with belonging to a bad group. A similar survey of 68 patients at a private clinic indicated that improvement of self-esteem; social reasons; family pressure; improving potential for employment; and change of partner were the most common reasons for tattoo removal (Varma and Lanigan 1999). Table 1 also summarizes reasons for tattoo removal. As with tattoo acquisition, consumers' reasons for removal are tied to their self-concepts.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. The list of reasons for tattoo acquisition and removal can be dichotomized as attempts to influence a sense of differentiation from or assimilation to others. Enhancing a sense of individuality, commemorating a life event, expressing an aspect of one's personality, rebelling, spirituality, a sense of control and improving body aesthetics are actions that further differentiate a person. These motivations are people's attempts to further define who they are by distinguishing themselves from others. In contrast, marking a group membership, conforming to normative influence, and displaying romantic devotion to another are actions that further assimilate a person. These motivations represent attempts to integrate within a larger collective.

In her optimal distinctiveness theory, Brewer (1991) suggests that the need to be an individual (i.e., differentiation) and the need to belong to social groups (i.e., assimilation) are the two primary motivations that comprise a person's self-concept. Brewer finds that an individual is constantly negotiating the need to individuate the self from others and integrate the self within social groups as she searches for and defines her identity over time. For example, students of the same university have a shared collective identity that satisfies an assimilation need, while at the same time they see themselves as distinct from another university's students to satisfy a differentiation need. Sometimes, however, a group may become too large, creating a greater sense of assimilation in its members as just another face in the crowd. In response members may further subdivide into more distinct groups to enhance feelings of differentiation. Thus students at a large university can feel too assimilated and therefore further subdivide into more distinct groups, such as sororities or sports clubs.

Another important aspect of Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory is the distinction between group memberships and social identities. Brewer argues that a person's social identities are *not* the same as his or her memberships in groups or social categories. Membership in social categories may not always be voluntary, as in the case of a person's ethnicity, whereas an individual *chooses* her social identities. Although a person may belong to a variety of social categories, she chooses to identify with those groups and social categories that allow her to successfully negotiate a symbiosis between her needs for assimilation and differentiation.

In 1996, Brewer and Gardner extended optimal distinctiveness theory to include a tripartite representation of the self-concept. Specifically they find that the self is composed of individual, relational, *and* collective components. These components are "interactive" and "coexist" within the same individual (Sedikedes and Brewer 2001, p. 2). The individual component represents unique traits and characteristics a person possesses. Contrasting these traits and characteristics with those of others creates a sense of individual-self. An action that further differentiates a person from others will enhance a sense of individual-self (Sedikedes and Brewer 2001). The relational component represents the role a person plays in meaningful dyadic personal relationships with others (e.g., parent-child, friendships, and romantic involvements). Reflected appraisal from relationship partners creates a sense of relational-self. Actions that further assimilate a person with these significant others will enhance a sense of relational-self. The collective component represents larger social group memberships that do not require the same type of close relationships that comprise the relational-self (Sedikedes and Brewer 2001). Factors that separate in-group membership from out-group membership create a sense of collective-self. Any actions that further assimilate a person into these large social groups will enhance a sense of collective-self (Sedikedes and Brewer 2001).

Prior disposition research suggests that motivations for disposition potentially stem from the three components of the self. For example, Kates' (2001) found that people dying of AIDS used the disposition of their possessions to enhance familial bonds via gift giving, or distance disliked family members via exclusion during disposition. These findings are indicative of consumers using disposition to influence the relational-self. The collective-self

may also motivate disposition such as a person changing her hairstyle after joining a new social organization (McAlexander and Schouten 1989) or giving up an old car associated with partying to mark the transition from “young rebel” to “mature adult” (Young 1991, p. 36). Finally, the individual-self also seems to motivate disposition. For instance, the elderly will bequeath a favorite possession as a means of achieving symbolic immortality (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000).

The focus of the present study is to utilize the conceptual framework of optimal distinctiveness theory to better understand disposition as a means of identity negotiation. Prior literature in marketing primarily explores disposition within specific settings such as garage sales (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), death (Kates 2001) or divorce (McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts 1993). Optimal distinctiveness theory should provide further insight into when people are likely to engage in disposition. Few of these prior works attempt to understand the factors that precipitate disposition at a broader theoretical level. To that end, this paper turns toward a discussion of the method.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data collection followed the general approach of psychological phenomenological interviewing (Creswell 1998; Moustakas 1994; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Although the study was phenomenological in nature, the authors participated in several ethnographic activities prior to formally collecting the interview data. During a two-year period, the authors sought to develop a deeper understanding of the tattoo subculture, progressively narrowing their focus on removal. At first, the authors read books on the history of tattooing (e.g., Gilbert 2000; Mifflin 2001; Schiffmacher and Riemschneider 2001). Next, the authors purchased several tattoo magazines (*Flash*, *Tattoo*, and *Skin Art*) from a local bookstore and reviewed their contents. After realizing that these sources focused more on acquisition and thus provided little information on removal, the authors informally interviewed two tattoo artists while working in parlors; visited one web site that discussed tattoo removal; inquired with three offices housing plastic surgeons that conducted tattoo removal; and had two informal conversations with consumers who had tattoos and have considered removal. These activities provided a richer understanding of tattoo acquisition and its tie to removal.

The sampling procedure for the study was based on the criterion of wanting or having a tattoo removed (Miles and Huberman 1994). Informants for the study were recruited from three newspaper advertisements. One ad was placed in the primary newspaper in a large, southern city. Two similar ads were placed in a local newspaper and a college campus newspaper within a medium sized, southern city. All of the advertisements offered a small incentive for an interview with consumers who have had a tattoo removed or intended to have a tattoo removed.

The authors obtained twenty-two informants who ranged in age from nineteen to forty three. The sample consisted of both males and females (although more women than men responded to the ad) and represented a diverse set of educational backgrounds and occupations. For example, the sample varied from students, who held part time jobs, to highly educated professionals within the fields of health care, real estate, and services. Table 2 summarizes the demographic information of the respondents. It is important to note that several of the respondents felt that tattoo removal was a deeply personal topic, and they asked that they not be identified in the final report. Thus, to ensure confidentiality, all the names reported in this article are pseudonyms. Furthermore, the authors have intentionally omitted some detail to respect the privacy of the informants.

The sixty-minute, unstructured, depth interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The data were analyzed and interpreted according to the protocol for phenomenology suggested by Moustakas' (1994). This protocol consists of four steps: “epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis” (Moustakas 1994, p. 84). Epoche involves setting aside “prejudgments and biases” in order to focus on the topic under investigation (p. 85). Phenomenological reduction involves “describing in textural language just what one sees ... revealing

TABLE 2
Informant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Number of tattoos	Number have/want removed
Lana	43	1	1 Removed
Oscar	27	2	Wants 1 removed
Diane	23	3	Wants 1 removed
Chandra	23	2	Wants 2 removed
Teresa	19	1	Wants 1 removed
Barbara	23	1	Wants 1 removed
Donna	37	1	Wants 1 removed
Bob	41	4	1 Removed
Connie	23	1	1 Removed
Amy	23	3	Wants 1 removed
Carla	24	2	1 Removed
Janet	34	3	Wants 3 removed
Jill	27	1	1 Removed then covered
Kim	21	2	Wants 2 removed
Cindy	30	2	Had 1 covered
Maggie	29	2	2 Removed
Sandra	29	5	Wants 1 removed
Crystal	27	4	Wants 2 removed
George	24	2	Wants 1 removed
Susan	25	5	3 Removed
Robin	27	2	Wants 1 removed
Karen	24	2	Wants 1 removed

the qualities of the experience” (p. 90). Imaginative variation is the act of using “varying frames of references, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives...to arrive at the underlying precipitating factors” that account for the experience (p. 98). Synthesis is the “integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience” (p. 100).

The authors sought to analyze and interpret the data in the spirit of Moustakas’ (2004) approach. First, the authors bracketed their biases and prejudgments. Next, turning to the interview data, the authors moved back and forth between the transcripts and the complete set of data to identify significant statements (i.e., textural language) from each of the informants’ reported experiences. Using various perspectives and constantly questioning the analysis, these significant statements were combined into “meaning units” (Creswell 1998, p. 150) that represent the experience (i.e., imaginative variation). Third, the authors developed a thick description and identified specific quotes to elaborate on the informants’ experiences (i.e., synthesis). In the final step, the authors developed an

interpretive description of each meaning unit in light of existing theory, attempting to capture the essence of the tattoo removal experience as it relates to larger theoretical considerations.

Two methods of validation were used to ensure accurate representation and reliability of the data: respondent validation and the constant comparative method. To achieve respondent validation, the first author went back to several subjects with tentative results to refine and confirm the findings. In addition, using the constant comparative method (repeated to and fro between data parts), the investigators inspected and compared all the data fragments within the phenomenon under study. For reporting purposes, the authors chose to present several of the respondents' experiences with an interpretation woven into each of the individual stories. In contrast to reporting respondents' experiences in a piecemeal fashion via thematic categories, the authors believe that the individual story format most clearly illustrates the conceptual framework for understanding identity negotiation via tattoo removal. For completeness, table 3 reports both a summary of informants' meaning statements for why they obtained the tattoo and wanted or had the tattoo removed, as well as how long they considered tattoo acquisition. Within table 3 informants are also grouped according to which aspect of the self the informant is attempting to influence by their tattoo removal.

FINDINGS

The data were analyzed and interpreted in light of Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory. Optimal distinctiveness theory suggests that an individual is constantly negotiating the need to individuate the self from others and integrate the self within relational and collective social groups as she searches for and defines her identity over time. Thus, the authors sought to unpack the identity negotiation strategies of the informants as they relate to tattoo removal.

For many consumers the process of deciding to acquire and remove a tattoo is multi-layered and complex. A variety of factors in the consumer's life, such as past events, others' reactions to the tattoo, the wearer's social identities, alterations of the social environment, and even possible future events may affect the tattoo's identity ramifications for the consumer. A tattoo's relationship to all of these personal factors makes the decision to acquire or remove a tattoo deeply embedded within the consumer's life as a whole. Therefore, the authors chose to present cases that provided vivid detail regarding the consumer's life situation at the time of acquisition and removal. Although the authors report interview data for only a subset of the sample, table 3 suggests that virtually all respondents, regardless of how simple or complex the life story, acquired and removed (or planned to) their tattoo while negotiating feelings of differentiation or assimilation.

Maggie—Trying to Be a Mature Individual with a Rebellious Tattoo

Maggie got her two tattoos when she was in high school. Her boyfriend, who had tattoos of his own, was part of a rather deviant group with which Maggie ended up spending a lot of time.

I had a boyfriend who was into heavy metal music and was a rebellious outsider and he had tattoos. I thought it was cool, being rebellious against my age and society. I was seventeen and I wasn't supposed to have them, legally. The tattoo was a demon holding a crystal ball as if it was telling a fortune. It was something that was just on the wall. It was kind of satanic. It ran through my mind at the time, maybe I should get something more feminine or girly, that tattoo is kind of evil. I guess I was kind of influenced by my boyfriend being there and from what he had. That was kind of his thing. I seriously don't know what made me decide on that tattoo other than the influence or pressure of getting something that went with the type of people we hung out with, the clothes, and the music we listened to. I felt that I was kind of leaning toward what they thought was cool.

Maggie was trying to conform to her group of friends when she decided which tattoo to acquire. This is a classic example of tattoo acquisition to influence the collective-self and be more accepted by a group. Thus, Maggie's tattoo enhanced her feelings of affiliation with the group with which she interacted with regularly.

TABLE 3
Tattoo Decision Information

Self-Concept Change ¹	Pseudonym	Reasons to obtain	Time considered ²	Reasons for removal
Individual	Lana	Trendy; relationship vow; conform to group; art value/uniqueness	2 Years	Relationship ended; loss of uniqueness; identity conflict
Individual	Oscar	Drinking; spontaneous; friends' influence	None	Negative reminder; identity conflict;
Individual	Diane	Spontaneous; depression	30 Minutes	Not desired design; negative reminder; lacks meaning
Individual	Chandra	Friend's influence; addictive; trendy; beauty enhancement	1-2 Years	Lack of uniqueness; lacks meaning; fears negative reactions
Individual	Teresa	Drinking; spontaneous; friend's influence	None	Does not fit with character; fears negative reactions; negative reminder; lacks meaning
Individual	Barbara	Assert independence	6 Months	Mistake; poor quality
Individual	Donna	Trendy; friends' influence	3 Months	Mistake; poor quality
Relational	Bob	Assert independence; art value/uniqueness	1 Year	Show of love for wife
Relational	Connie	Assert independence; friend's influence	1 Year	Parents' negative reaction; lifestyle transition
Relational	Amy	Vow tattoo	1 Month	Negative reminder; fears negative reactions; mistake
Relational/Collective	Carla	Spontaneous; boredom	None	Parents' negative reaction; lifestyle transition
Relational/Collective	Janet	Personal expression, addictive	A few years	More responsible; show of love for kids and friends; fears negative reactions
Relational/Collective	Jill	Spontaneous; conform to group	None	Lacks meaning; mother's negative reaction; change in group
Collective	Kim	Trendy; conform to group; friendship vow; friends' influence	1 Week	Lacks meaning; change in group
Collective	Cindy	Trendy	None	Lifestyle transition; lacks meaning
Collective	Maggie	Conform to group; rebellion; boyfriend's influence	2.5 Years	More responsible; fears negative reactions
Collective	Sandra	Personal expression	None	Does not fit with image; lacks meaning
Collective	Susan	Rebellion; alter identity; conform to group	1-2 Days	Change in group; committed to job; show of love for kids
Collective	George	Drinking; conform to group	5 Minutes	Lifestyle transition; change in group; fears negative reactions; not me
Collective	Crystal	Husband's influence; friends' influence; relationship vow; beauty enhancement	1 Week-2 Months	Divorced; fears negative reactions; not desired design; poor quality
Collective	Robin	Friend's influence; rebellion; conform to group	None	More confident; in new roles; fears negative reactions
Collective	Karen	Trendy; beauty enhancement	4 Months	Lifestyle transition; does not fit her image

¹ Level of self-concept at which act of disposition changed feelings of differentiation and assimilation.

² Amount of time the individual contemplated getting their tattoo.

After Maggie finished college, however, her life started to change in a number of important ways.

I finished college and then decided I needed to get a real job. That was a wake-up call, so to speak. I was maturing. I had my own place and really had some time to myself thinking and really looking inside myself and discovering this (the tattoo) is not me. I'm not listening to the same music, not partying the amount that I was, didn't hang around with the same people. I had changed pretty much everything: the way I wore makeup, the way I wore my hair, the way I dressed, the way I carried myself, who I hung out with, everything. I was just really discovering who I was, or who I wanted to be, and what I wanted out of life. A lot of things were going through my mind; that this (the tattoo) really does not fit my lifestyle or what I want or choose to be. I got to thinking about that, and it just was no longer appealing to me to see myself in another way. When I got out of the shower and looking in the mirror and I see that (the tattoo), it just reminded me that maybe I'm not what I'm trying to be.

When examining her story in light of optimal distinctiveness theory, the inconsistency between Maggie's tattoos and her new lifestyle should make Maggie feel differentiated. In other words, she should feel very different from the type of person she wants to be in her own mind. This strong sense of differentiation should motivate Maggie to try and achieve a greater sense of assimilation with her new mature self-concept. Therefore, optimal distinctiveness theory predicts that Maggie will attempt to change her individual-self to feel more connected with how she conceptualizes her new self-concept by removing the tattoos. Indeed, after her tattoos were removed Maggie reported feeling much less conflicted about her sense of self.

I felt relieved, freedom. I am not worrying, and I've actually shed that part of my rebellious life. I can live on. I carried this baggage of my rebellious life around with me and having them [the tattoos] removed, I'm just relieved.

Amy—A Vow Tattoo Disrupts the Relational-Self

Ever since she was fifteen, Amy wanted to get a tattoo after seeing a temporary butterfly tattoo that she really liked. Once she reached age twenty, Amy's parents considered her old enough to do as she wished, so Amy acquired a butterfly tattoo that she designed herself over a four month period. On her twenty-first birthday Amy acquired another tattoo of a dragon. That same year Amy began a dating relationship which would lead to her third tattoo.

I started dating a man who was actually quite older than I was. I decided that relationship wasn't going anywhere, but I still really felt close to him. He was just scaring me to death because he was talking about marriage after like two months. I was really attached to him and cared for him a lot, but he freaked me out with the whole marriage thing, so I decided to break it off. So I got the ankle tattoo to remember him by. The tattoo is in Chinese and it means 'always in my heart.' It basically meant I would always have a place in my heart for him.

Obviously Amy's vow tattoo affected her relational-self by emphasizing her feelings for her ex-boyfriend. Unfortunately, Amy's tattoo would soon take on a new and unwanted significance.

[After breaking up] I told him we could still communicate and be friends, but then he showed up at my house uninvited one night when I had another male visitor over and he just demanded to be let in and then he started stalking me. I contacted the police about it. The guy that was over at my house at the time knew someone in the police department and got his buddy to mention to this guy to leave me alone or go to jail for harassment. It stopped after that.

Although the stalking incident bothered Amy, it was not enough to warrant removal of her ankle tattoo. After all, the tattoo was in Chinese and did not actually feature the name of her ex-boyfriend, so Amy was able to put the tattoo out of her mind and avoid any disruptive effects the tattoo might have on her relational-self. Some time

later Amy married another man and had a baby boy. Following the birth of her child, Amy started to seriously consider having the ankle tattoo removed.

I'm married now and it just feels funny--having that as a reminder of a previous relationship. My husband just says, "Well you could tell people it's for the baby; that the baby will always be in your heart." But I'll know why I really got it. You can't lie to yourself. You know, kids are curious and will ask about anything. I knew he (her child) would probably ask me about it. He would notice it and I would tell him and he would ask why did you get it. I wouldn't want to lie to my child. That's not something I would ever want to do unless it's for his own good. So I wouldn't want to have to tell him about this man I dated before your daddy.

With the birth of her child Amy's tattoo is now causing a problem for her relational-self. Specifically, Amy's view of her tattoo as a symbol of deception towards her son is straining their relationship. In the language of optimal distinctiveness theory, the negative effect of Amy's ankle tattoo is differentiating her relational-self to an uncomfortable degree. This causes Amy to feel a need for greater assimilation with her son. Amy feels the only way to fulfill this need is to have her ankle tattoo removed.

Lana—Trying to be Part of the Young Crowd Backfires

After being married for a few years, Lana decided to get a vow tattoo that featured a rainbow with her husband's name on the bottom. Although the tattoo was a declaration of her relationship, it served more important functions for Lana.

It was something expressive to do and kind of a bonding thing with my husband at the time. My husband was six years younger than me. The age difference between us was weird, and he even seems younger than his real age, so that added more to it. I think that might have been part of it, just trying to stay younger. I always looked young because most people thought we were the same age, but I just felt I had to keep up in some ways to be young and not get in the way older people think. I felt like even though I looked young I knew I couldn't change my age, so I was thinking this would be something to sort of impress them [his friends] because they all had tattoos. They were always hanging around and coming over. I think I was trying to be part of his friends, and more of them were doing it [getting tattoos] at the time. I guess I wanted to fit in with younger people. It looked like a way to be different or expressive. I felt like I was going through a sort of midlife crisis at the time.

In addition to affecting her relational-self, Lana's tattoo enhanced feelings of assimilation to her husband's group of young friends for her collective-self. Eventually, however, two things happened to alter how Lana viewed her tattoo. The first was that Lana's relationship with her husband ended in divorce. At this point the tattoo of his name was obviously no longer a defining aspect of her relational-self; however, that was not the main reason she had acquired the tattoo. Therefore, Lana did not really consider removing her tattoo until she noticed a change in the tattooing trend.

At first it was more of a novelty, then as time went on, it just seemed like everybody had one. So it wasn't a big deal anymore and it kind of lost that ability to make me feel young. My niece, who's in college now, got one and my mother didn't really react to that at all. She just shrugged it off. So I started realizing pretty soon it [tattooing] was just going to become standard, like the way everyone had their ears pierced. I think I just got sick of it, and I often wondered how other people can stand to look at theirs all the time. I remember thinking this is just old, it's something I felt real good about then, but it was something at the time that was new and now it's not. It has lost its interest and nobody else cares about it anymore either.

After Lana noticed everybody else getting tattooed, her tattoo became a liability for her collective-self. Originally Lana acquired the tattoo to feel more assimilated with a younger crowd. Now that everybody was getting tattoos, Lana's tattoo no longer possessed its youth-restorative properties by being associated exclusively with a younger crowd. In terms of optimal distinctiveness theory, this change in the tattooing trend enormously increased the size

of Lana's "in-group" (i.e. people possessing tattoos), which resulted in feelings of extreme assimilation for Lana and made her uncomfortable.

I really didn't like the fact that I was conforming to something that everyone was doing because that's not something I do. I just wanted to do something different, like I did it more for myself rather than to declare anything, but it had become more mainstream.

Finally Lana decided to remove her tattoo. Lana's reflection on her tattoo experience reveals how removing the tattoo allowed her to negotiate through her identity conflict by replacing her feelings of assimilation with a new sense of differentiation.

It's weird because I've sort of felt all this is kind of silly, everything people do to their bodies, like earrings or nose rings or whatever. It almost seems like such a waste of time. As I got into my forties I started to think things we do don't really make any sense. I had my ears pierced when I was twelve and I'm not sure why I did that except just to go along with what was trendy or in fashion. I've started thinking maybe the body should just be pure and shouldn't have all of these extra things pierced and tattooed. In some ways it kind of gives me a sick feeling. I was just trying to return to a time when my body was left alone in its natural state.

DISCUSSION

In addition to providing descriptive reasons for tattoo removal, this study's findings illustrate that tattoo acquisition and removal are undertaken as a means of identity negotiation. The informants initially acquired a tattoo to either enhance feelings of affiliation (e.g., conform to a group, follow a trend, friend's influence, relationship vow) or feelings of individuation (e.g., assert independence, rebellion, personal expression). Tattoos were typically acquired under the implicit assumption that factors influencing the tattoo's identity ramifications would remain stable over time. For many consumers this assumption proved false as lifestyle transitions such as moving, changing friends, marriage, and divorce all changed the tattoo's identity ramifications. In some cases these changes created an identity conflict between the tattooed aspect of the consumer's identity and the identity associated with a new social role or group of friends. In other cases these changes made the tattoo obsolete or meaningless to the consumer. Regardless of which change occurred, when identity conflict arose, consumers sought tattoo removal services.

This study's findings provide insight into the link between the self-concept and disposition. Respondents who felt overly individuated in a frequently activated social identity group (e.g., occupation), compensated for this conflict by enhancing feelings of affiliation in another frequently activated social identity (e.g., group of close friends). Even impending new social identities that had yet to be established (e.g., future occupation) conflicted with a currently existing social identity (e.g., friends). This finding illustrates that even repeated cognitive, as opposed to situational, activation is sufficient to create a new, albeit imagined, social identity. In this case, the new cognitively-based social identity was powerful enough to warrant tattoo removal, further illustrating not all social identities are created equal and some have greater impact on disposition.

Although a rapidly growing literature, the research to date on disposition and its connection to the self tends to fall in one of three domains. One domain focuses on voluntary simplicity where disposition is practiced in an effort to cut the tie to, or separate from, an identity (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Huneke 2005; Sharma 1985). A second domain involves the involuntary disposition of possessions due to uncontrollable, external circumstances, such as a natural disaster (Delorme, Zinkhan, and Hagen 2004). In this case, the consumer is fighting to maintain his/her self identity and "struggles to preserve his/her possessions and thus symbolic self" (Delorme, Zinkhan, and Hagen 2004, p. 188). The third domain of disposition and the connection to the self consists of the context in which the consumer uses disposition as a bridge to transfer his/her identity to others, as in the case of the elderly or AIDS victims passing on possessions to achieve symbolic immortality (Kates 2001; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000).

The complexity of the identity negotiation found in the tattoo removal process extends the literature on disposition and the self-concept. This study's findings show that tattoo removal does not fit neatly into one of the three domains associated with disposition and the self (i.e., separate from an identity; transfer an identity to others; maintain an identity). In fact, this study identified a complex, continuous identity reconstruction process whereby the consumer is continually negotiating the need to individuate the self from others and integrate the self with relational and collective social groups as she searches for and defines her self-concept over time. The informants who were undergoing tattoo removal were not simply committing a single, granular act of cutting ties to an identity, transferring an identity to others, or struggling to maintain their sense of self. The data show that the informants were experiencing a more elastic process involving the balancing and rebalancing of multiple (i.e., individual, relational and collective), conflicting, co-existing identities that composed the self-concept.

This study's findings also complement and extend Schouten's (1991) work on the role of consumption activities in shaping the maintenance and development of the self-concept. His work examines the consumption of plastic surgery during times of personal self-transition. Schouten (1991) argues that plastic surgery is part of a symbolic consumption process that relates to personal rites of passage and identity reconstruction. Arguably, tattoo and plastic surgery services are similar because they are often obtained while the self is in transition, and they represent relatively permanent surgical changes to the body with identity ramifications. However, our research demonstrates that altering the body via tattoo acquisition and removal is part of an identity negotiation, rather than a reconstruction, process. Furthermore, that negotiation process involves not just the reconstruction of a single social identity, but the negotiation of multiple conflicting needs (i.e., assimilation and differentiation) as they relate to various social identities that make up an individual's self-concept.

Plastic surgery seems to be strongly tied to performance in key roles, lifestyle transitions, and a resulting change in self (Schouten 1991). This study found these factors are also important to acquiring and removing a tattoo; however, not all role transitions elicit tattoo consumption or disposition. This study's findings indicate that a role transition causes a person to acquire or remove a tattoo under two primary conditions. When a consumer bases part of her self-concept on the group or category membership that is altered by a role transition then she may desire to acquire or remove a tattoo. In addition, a consumer may desire tattoo removal when she views the tattoo as inconsistent with her new social role. In this condition, the person must perceive an incompatibility between her new social role and her tattooed identity, such that the conflict sufficiently disrupts her sense of self.

This study also revealed factors other than key roles and lifestyle transitions that were part of the consumer story of tattoo removal. For example, the informants explained that interpersonal influence, broken relationships, negative perceptions, identity conflict, and a lack of (or negative associations with) product meaning, also warranted tattoo removal. More importantly, this study's findings raise an even larger question when compared to Schouten's (1991) research. Plastic surgery is a form of symbolic consumption used to seek a more stable, harmonious self-concept. This study found that some people also acquire tattoos to alter their identity, whereas, others acquire tattoos with less intention and more impulse. Regardless of a consumer's reasons for obtaining a tattoo, the service often results in unintended, long-term consequences for the self-concept. This study's findings suggest that many consumers, like Schouten's (1991) informants, may initially seek harmony in the self-concept when they purchase a tattoo service; but over time the tattoo ultimately disrupts, instead of stabilizes, the consumer's identity. Instead of finding harmony, this study's informants indicated the tattoo eventually created further instability in their self-concepts.

One implication of this finding is that achieving a stable self-concept via consumption may not even be possible. The consumer may be involved in constant identity negotiation, which is fueled, resolved, and further fueled by consumption. A person may consume tattoo services to attain a stable self-concept, but later find the tattoo has unforeseen identity implications that disrupt her sense of self. Therefore, the consumer considers further consumption, via tattoo removal, to stabilize the sense of self. The result is a cyclical process of consumption to maintain the consumer's identity beginning with tattoo acquisition, which eventually disrupts the identity; continuing with tattoo removal, to repair the disrupted identity; and possibly continuing with further tattoo acquisition

still in search of harmony in the self-concept. The authors found evidence of this continuous cycle in one of the interviews, where the informant obtained the tattoo, removed the tattoo, and then had the removal scar covered with yet another tattoo.

This study's findings are also applicable to identity negotiation via consumption and disposition in other domains of consumer behavior. For example McAlexander and Schouten's (1989) study of college students' hairstyles found that a student uses his/her hairstyle as a method of altering either feelings of individuation (e.g., independence from their parents, from an ex-boyfriend) or affiliation (e.g., to fit in with a new group). A person's hairstyle is a salient characteristic and, particularly in adolescence, can mark the person's membership in a particular group or individuate that person from others (i.e., a particularly outrageous hairstyle). Similar to tattoos, therefore, a hairstyle represents an effective consumption (and disposition) venue for making any social identity more salient as a means of offsetting disruptions in the self-concept. A similar cyclical pattern, for the purposes of identity negotiation, is also likely for other transition-related consumer behaviors such as cosmetics and clothing consumption.

Our results suggest several directions for future research on disposition and identity. One interesting question is the relative influence each component of the tripartite self has on a consumer's consumption and disposition decisions. One possible answer is whichever aspect of the self is most currently salient will exert the most influence on a consumer's self-concept. The constant identity negotiation efforts many of our respondents engaged in seem to support this interpretation. Alternatively, the conceptual overlap of the relational-self and collective-self suggests that either may chronically exert more influence over consumption and disposition decisions than the other. In fact, their relative influence may interact with gender such that women are more influenced by the relational-self and men are more influenced by the collective-self. This interpretation is consistent with how men and women traditionally define themselves (cf., Brewer and Gardner 1996; Gabriel and Gardner 1999). Future research may test this prediction in a disposition context.

At a more fundamental level, our results beg the question of the relative effects consumption and disposition have on stabilizing a consumer's identity. For instance, future research may find that disposition behaviors are better able to stabilize a person's identity because disposition is seen as more authentic compared to the materialism of consumption (cf., Kozinets 2002). Of course this assumes it is even possible for consumers to truly stabilize their identity via consumption and disposition. In light of the present results, there is certainly reason to doubt this assumption.

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