

Journeys: lived experiences of tattooed people

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Jan Pakarinen

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Author Jan Pakarinen

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to form an understanding of the lived experiences of consumers throughout their lives. This is done by presenting a framework that considers consumption as a lifelong journey. Through the use of consumers' own narratives, I introduce their life worlds to the reader in a Consumer Culture Theory context. While I have organized those consumer stories by themes, they are left open for further interpretations.

In each of the four main chapters, I challenge how previous consumer research has defined consumers and consumption. In the first chapter I show how consumption and communication of identity is not unproblematic. The second chapter looks at consumption as a lifelong social and individual experience. The third chapter challenges the idea that postmodern consumers are in what some would call a schizophrenic state because of trying to embody various differentiated meanings and styles simultaneously. And the fourth chapter presents how consumers are able to express their individual tastes and styles through endless customization and according to their own developing aesthetic.

Tattoo consumption offers a truly unique research ground due to various distinctive characters such as permanency of the act, their concurrent personal and public nature, and the interactions between craftsmen (tattooists) and consumers. Social, cultural, and psychological elements are inseparable subjects of analysis in tattoo consumption, which makes it an area of interest to every marketer wanting to understand people.

Keywords lived experiences, tattoo consumption, hermeneutics, being-in-the-world, consumer culture, consumption as a journey

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INTRODUCTION

“You look at a human being, and you think you know who they are because, what, you’ve listened to six records. I wrote six songs on six records, so you know everything about me? No.”

Musician Thomas DeLonge

I started out my research of tattoo consumption trying to figure out meanings behind individual tattoos. As fascinating as they sometimes were, I eventually came to the realization that the lived experiences of the people I talked to, that sometimes had seemingly nothing to do with tattoos, had everything to do with them.

“For me, personally, when approaching the role, it’s sort of hard to figure out because there’s so many things he gets hit with. I think that Donnie is what he comes in contact with. In the simplest terms, like, and most abstract terms, I could say it’s a journey. Like it’s just a journey about discovering who you are. And the irony of the whole thing is that hopefully by the end it’s not only Donnie who realizes it but the audience in a way. And they have to go back, and have to watch it again, and they have to watch it again. It’s just like this ridiculous, fantastic, completely absurd, completely naturalistic and realistic mixture of humour, sadness, comedy and madness, rolled up in this ball of this like crazy story, journey. It forces you if it does force you at all to come to your own conclusion about what it’s about ... It’s like an individual experience for everyone. It’s not about one thing ... no one can come to any finite or like, objective conclusion.”

Actor Jake Gyllenhaal of his role as ‘Donnie’ in the film Donnie Darko

Much like Donnie in the film, I was searching for meaning behind these visions of mine, mine being less Doomsday-related and more of people having certain meanings hidden in their individual tattoos. What I found out instead was, like Gyllenhaal says, a journey, or a multitude of journeys that people with tattoos described to me during my interviews. I think it is also important to realize that the journeys are very different for the people themselves and

for me as I interpreted them. Much like they are different to you as a reader when I portray them here.

Again, like the audience of *Donnie Darko*, I found that a lot of the interviewees had been going back to their previous experiences continuously and found out new things about themselves, new insights, connected experiences and narratives, and went through the emotions, old and new. Certainly this is a lifelong process in which a person re-evaluates his/her identity, consumption, social status, being...

I do not think it serves a purpose to try and form a coherent, single narrative from those journeys that also are “this ridiculous, fantastic, completely absurd ... mixture of sadness ... madness”, but rather present a curated selection of the themes I saw inside these journeys and accept the fact that only a fraction of the true spectrum can be compressed to a presentable form in an academic paper such as this. For me, qualitative research should offer understanding and insight into the realities of consumers, communities or any sort of area of interest. That understanding and insight surely, if well presented, is applicable in the larger context of marketing and consumer culture theory, as well as the managerial context (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), to better make sense of “what consuming bodies do” like Patterson and Schroeder (2010) suggest, and through that to form an understanding of how to better connect with consumers, people.

Holt (1995) studied how consumers consume. He says that previous research theorized objects of consumption carrying symbolic meanings that signify similar things across a variety of consumers. He aims to develop a “typology of consumption practices” that would better describe the diversity of consumption. I present an extension to Holt’s framework by introducing an overarching dimension called consumption as a journey. The ‘consumption as a journey’ framework includes the four dimensions described by Holt, consuming as experience, consuming as integration, consuming as classification, and consuming as play but brings forward the interconnected nature of those categories and adds especially social, cultural and psychological flair to them.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Existing research, consumer research as well as fields like psychology and sociology have been interested in tattoo consumption for decades. The earliest social study that I used dates back to the 1920's, as Hambly (1925) amazingly portrays the social and cultural significance and history of tattooing in an investigative manner. With my research I will answer Patterson and Schroeder's (2010, p. 263) more contemporary call for consumer culture researchers to abandon "our fetish for meaning, and champion instead an examination of what consuming bodies do." While previous research has, purposefully or not, simplified (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers, 2006; Tate and Shelton, 2008), problematized (Stirn, Hintz, and Brähler, 2006; Lemma, 2010), or otherwise highlighted only certain parts of tattoo consumption, like the experience of getting a tattoo (Goulding et al., 2004), I will offer an extensive insight into the lived experiences of a number of Finnish tattoo consumers. I find it extremely important in order to understand (tattoo) consumption to look at how consumers interact with the outside world, in social and cultural contexts and hear their life experiences starting from a young age.

Thus, my guiding research question is:

What do (tattoo) consuming bodies do?

Further on my research is guided by these subsequent research questions:

How is the experience of being a tattooed person?

What does it mean to be a tattooed person?

How do consumers create a distinctive style?

Through an emergent approach, I was able to identify four key themes that were present in all of my interviewees' lives. These themes also act as key topics and organizing chapters in this paper, and are as follows:

1. Complexity of consumption
2. Meaning of being a tattooed person
3. Construction of a distinctive style
4. Aesthetic

'Complexity of consumption' tells the story of how tattoo consumers face the outside world and become confident in their consumption habit, despite opposition. This chapter is divided to four smaller parts.

'Meaning of being a tattooed person' expands the current view of temporality of consumption experiences and explores the meanings that tattoo consumption gives people throughout their life.

'Construction of a distinctive style' offers a view on how tattoo consumers navigate the postmodern consumption environment and are able to use tattoo consumption as a stabilizing tool.

'Aesthetic' shows how individual style and self-expression is visible in tattoo consumption.

Each chapter includes different levels of analysis, but mainly we move from a societal and social level of analysis to a philosophical one between the first two chapters, and from an identity level to the inspection of individual taste in the following two.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is the research tradition that addresses "the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption." As the modern marketing

paradigm theorized consumers as passive receivers of meanings created by advertisers and marketers, CCT research “shows that many consumers’ lives are constructed around multiple realities and that they use consumption to experience realities (linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and identity play) that differ dramatically from the quotidian.” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 875-876)

I feel that exploring these realities is in fact one of the most important things consumer research can focus on. As the closing argument of their comprehensive review of the history of CCT, Arnould and Thompson (2005) point out that scientific culture, especially in the context of consumer culture, deals with a huge variety of different types of meanings and how differently people understand them. This exchange of interpretations instead of facts can be puzzling: “Such a disciplinary situation may not always be comfortable or comforting, but it can be energizing, thought provoking, and inspiring, and it can provide a fertile intellectual ground for theoretical innovations and advancements.” (p. 877)

I see that the point of consumer research, like mine, is to offer a platform for these energizing, thought provoking, and inspiring stories like the ones I heard from my interviewees. I try to convey a sort of themed picture, like a screenplay, of what the life worlds of these tattoo consumers are. Their journeys as well are not always comfortable or coherent, which in a way is bad for science, cause they could be interpreted in a million different ways, but fascinating for whoever hears them out. I see my role as the researcher to first of all show interest in them, which is how you get people to share their stories in the first place, and then bring those stories forward to a larger audience. This was not something I expected, but I feel a responsibility to tell these stories. Importantly I also feel that consumer research is one the scientific disciplines for which it is natural to try and bring science and ‘ordinary’ people closer to each other, an often-debated issue.

In a Heideggerian manner (Warnock, 1970) I try to describe the sort of being-in-the-world experience that tattoo consumers I interviewed have, both in relation to their tattoos and to the outside world. Heidegger used the term being-in-the-world as a replacement for the traditional subject-object view. Most of previous tattoo researches agree that tattoos are more than

objects, and some (Oksanen and Turtiainen, 2005) suggest that especially heavily tattooed people are in fact inseparable from their tattoos and that is how they experience the world, as a tattooed person.

The postmodern consumption dogma of seeing consumers as actively and purposefully seeking meanings from different forms of consumption, then combining them to a bigger whole, forming their individual, social and cultural identities is still dominant in contemporary marketing research. And while I still do believe that the postmodern paradigm present (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Holt, 1995) in much of Consumer Culture Theory can help us understand contemporary consumption, my current research has provided me with yet another layer of understanding of how consumers navigate their own and collective realities.

What I mean by this is that, I think, in order for us as marketers to understand consumers, we have to take a deeper look into their lives and how certain types of consumption affect their life experiences. Understanding consumers is the key here, when studying a consumption practice that is rooted to a much bigger cultural, social and psychological context. We cannot find out what it means that someone has a tattoo, if we do not hear and try to understand the cultural, social and individual experiences the person has gone, is going, and will go through in life with that tattoo (or rather as a tattooed person, like I mentioned).

In my research I portray the realities explained to me by the people I interviewed, combine them into themes that I saw recurring, and use mainly consumer research and social science theories as tools to shed light on those realities and themes. Worth noting, my research is a highly subjective construction, and while I try to portray many of my findings so that the reader can come to their own conclusion, they are surely biased by my own background, knowledge and interests.

Thompson (2004) states that recent research has set doubt on whether advertising and marketing act as the primary means in transferring cultural meanings into consumers' lives. I think the consumption of tattoos can serve as a great example of people trying to search meanings outside of commercial contexts. But are they actually similar meanings that

marketers offer through brands? Is the experience somehow stronger because of the seemingly non-commercial environment? Are tattoos seen as consumption?

Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) theorize that consumers try to gain control of their lives by consuming tattoos and that tattoos offer “subjective security”. This view seems to be supported by psychoanalytic studies like Lemma (2010). Tattoos offer a great research subject as they are highly subjective in nature, but often tell a very public narrative. They are not objects, but not always seen as part of your core self either. While people are struggling to construct a distinctive style (Murray, 2002), tattoos offer something permanent and distinctive. Or do they? Do consumers only think about the meanings they see themselves or does it matter what other people think? Is there any sort of anti-consumerist or anti-establishment agenda in tattoos? Do they help decide and communicate ‘who you are’?

Patterson and Schroeder (2010) point out that identities should be seen as not so much personally constructed but largely affected by “cultural history, embodiment and lived experience.” Throughout this paper you will see personal cultural histories of my interviewees, how they embody tattoo consumption in their unique ways, and some of their most important lived experiences as tattooed people.

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study is to form an understanding of the lived experiences of tattooed consumers throughout their lives. To reach this goal, the study is qualitative in nature and uses an emergent phenomenological approach. I use a hermeneutic framework described by Thompson (1997, p.439) that “interprets consumption meanings in relation to both a consumer’s sense of personal history and a broader narrative context of historically established meanings.”

This approach sees consumers as individuals whose life worlds and personal histories are distinctively heterogenic, and that those life worlds can only be interpreted using an iterative process, or a “fusion of horizons concept” (Thompson, 1997, p. 441) where the researcher uses

his or her own experience and understanding together with the texts from interviews to form a coherent interpretation, the outcome of which is largely dependent on the researcher's expertise and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied.

Data collection

I started out my research in the field with contacting two tattoo studios at the same time, explaining that I would like to do ethnographic research in those studios. One owner, whose studio I had never been to, declined, explaining that it would be too much trouble to organize schedules and to have an extra person in what already was a tight space to work in. The other owner of a tattoo studio where I have been tattooed myself, was interested and after a meeting welcomed me to come in "for as long as I wanted."

During the ethnographic phase I quickly got to know all of the five full-time tattooists and two apprentices at the studio, something that helped tremendously when I met clients in gaining their trust. I also used the studios extensive library and the tattooists' tacit knowledge to learn more about the history of tattoo culture.

Initially I spent 16 full working days at the studio, using jottings (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) or quick notes to record discussions with both clients and the tattooists. These I translated into full descriptions after each day. After that I returned to existing research and initially analysed my findings. During this time I became certain that in-depth interviews were needed and I started to look for potential interviewees based on intuition, and trying to find a wide variety of people from different backgrounds. Goulding (2005, p. 302) say that participants in a phenomenological study should only be selected "if they have lived the experience under study." As I wanted a perspective of lived experiences as tattooed people from a longer period of time, I began to look for people who already were heavily or quite heavily tattooed.

After this I went back to the field to meet more tattoo consumers. I spent eight more days at the studio, changing my routine from not including walk-in days, when there would be

possibly a large amount of people getting small tattoos in a limited space of time, and instead focusing on regular customers or customers with bigger projects. This allowed me to get to know the consumers better and after those eight days, I had a list of people I wanted to contact for in-depth interviews.

Five interviewees were chosen initially and all of them agreed to an interview, after which I asked the owner of the shop for an interview as well, which he agreed to. Five of these interviews were carried out in a single session, lasting from 1,5 to 2,5 hours and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The sixth interview was done in three smaller parts at the tattoo studio as the interviewee lived further away and regularly visited the studio and was not recorded but written down with extensive notes during the interview. All of the interviewees were promised anonymity, and given the opportunity to exclude anything they wanted after the interview was over. The interviews were then transcribed by me, the researcher, and formed in total 303 typed double-spaced pages.

Data-analysis

The hermeneutic framework that Thompson (1997) presents is constructed to make sense of textual data, stories that consumers tell in interviews. According to Goulding (2005) those stories are interpreted as facts as they represent the realities consumers experience the world through. This Heideggerian view of consumers 'being-in-the-world', leaves the researcher, interpreter, to use his or her "improvisational, intuitive, and creative capabilities" (Thompson, 1997, p. 452), going back and forth between the texts from interviews, theories and his or her own understandings to form an interpretation of reality. In the case of my research, this interpretation would be the themes and arguments that I have used to structure my analysis throughout this research, while leaving an opportunity for further interpretation by the reader.

The iterative process that Thompson describes, very much represents my process of working, as I often went back to the jottings I made during the first days of my ethnographic research while for example coding the transcripts. I also used many of the interpretations formed during the ethnographic phase in the field and from analysing the around 30 typed pages of notes

from that time, in this research, even though they do not show up as quotes or are not referenced specifically.

Finally I would like to make a reference to tattooing here that I felt described my research process perfectly as well. A tattooist at the shop was telling me about how he read about a Japanese tattoo master who was telling about the core principle of traditional Japanese tattooing. This was that the tattooist, by analysing what the recipient of a tattoo tells him, chooses a main subject matter. After the main subject matter is drawn on the person getting that tattoo, the rest, all of the backgrounds, surrounding elements, and stylistic choices are supposed to manifest themselves from the master's knowledge and expertise, intuitively, drawn on with a marker and then tattooed. I wanted to have no restricting rules for how to code and analyse the transcripts or which philosophical approaches to use, a process which was stressful, time-consuming and dubious at times, but proved to satisfy me in the end.

STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

I have organized this paper according to four main themes. The themes helped me to present individual stories of my interviewees in a narrated form. By not using personal characters as an organizing structure, I want to bring forward the common themes, rather than personal myths (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers, 2006). You will be able to follow some of my interviewees throughout the paper though, as I mention their unique characters where I felt it important, such as with the owner of the tattoo studio, as his position towards tattoo consumption is very different.

A review of the relevant literature is presented under each of those themes, by using the context of my research as examples. This way you as the reader can follow which concepts and theories I have used as a tool in each of those chapters, and the structure of the study is less repetitive. Recurring authors, articles and books have been instrumental in offering a comprehensive theoretical framework for my study.

Before those four main chapters, I present how the Finnish tattoo industry is unique as a research context, how there is a generational gap in attitudes towards tattooing and how my research was generally received in the field. These topics all help to understand the sort of atmosphere I did my research in and establish a background for interpreting the main themes, even if you have no previous exposure to tattoo consumption.

In the end I discuss the themes as a whole and my contribution to consumer research.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Qualitative research is restrictive by nature. The more you narrow your focus as a researcher, the more depth you can find from a person for example. Having the right balance of depth and broadness is an ongoing problem I am sure every consumer researcher battles with. With my limited resources and time, I ended up doing six in-depth interviews that I backed up with ethnography.

Much of the process was natural and random as I often waited at the tattoo studio without any knowledge of who might come in through the door. As much of the following process was though guided by my subjective, conscious and unconscious, views. Have I chosen six different interviewees, I have no doubt that the whole study would have looked totally different.

As a narrow construction of individual and collective realities, generalizations from this study should be drawn in a very cautious manner. Cultural context, the interviewees, and me as the researcher all limit this study's perception, as much as they created it.

Often I also felt overwhelmed by the theoretical perspectives I could have pursued. I love how tattoo consumption embodies cultural research, consumer research, psychoanalysis, social sciences, philosophy, mysticism, beliefs, religion, and much more, but it also means that the theoretical positions one can pursue are endless. This is why I wanted to leave many of what I call consumer journeys, as they were told to me, but in order to construct a coherent academic

study, I used the theories that I saw most relevant, using the resources I was able to find. And that perspective surely is limited. For example putting more emphasis and importance on consumer research studies than studies from other fields is an issue, one that I found hard to avoid.

BACKGROUND

THE FINNISH TATTOO INDUSTRY IN COMPARISON

I find it important to establish how the Finnish tattoo industry and culture compares to tattoo industries elsewhere, especially in the western societies, as that is the usual setting in previous academic and other studies. Velliquette et al., (2006, p. 37) discuss the term “new tattoo subculture”, as a broad umbrella term for all types of tattoo consumers, with the shared factor of “the experience of being tattooed”. This term is used to refer to especially American tattoo consumers, and ambiguously does represent the broadness of tattoo culture today in the western world as well.

The Finnish tattoo culture specifically, is a mixture of traditional western tattooing, with a heavy influence from the American tattoo culture and the ‘traditional American’ or ‘old school’ –style, and a homegrown style originating from a do-it-yourself attitude. In many cases Finland is culturally distant from southern Europe or the UK, and this applies to tattooing as well. Influences have rather been taken from all over, and personal freedom and creativity have been applied into creating tattoos. Every ‘famous’ style has its loyal followers of course, be it the old school, Japanese or blackwork, but very few artists can make a living by doing just one style. On the consumer side of things, the lack of an own national tradition means that many go through different styles, perhaps in phases, perhaps in cycles, getting more knowledgeable about different styles only once they have started getting tattoos, sometimes years into it.

This brings us to another major difference. The pace of tattooing is notably different in many big studios in Finland, compared to for example the US. The founder and owner of the tattoo shop I did my research in tells a bit about this as he has a good amount of experience working in the US as a visiting artist: “One time I worked in Washington, D.C., just for one day. I started at noon, and finished at 2 a.m. with a 15-minute lunch break during the day, people just kept coming. The shop boys took customers in, collected money, drew the stencils... they just brought the stencil to me, set the table ready and I tattooed – and then the next one.” He continues: “In San Diego you open at 12, finish at 9 or 10 in the evening during weekdays, but on weekends you work as long as there’s customers, until 4am sometimes, even if they’re drunk, you just tattoo them. ‘You don’t say no to money’ the boss used to say.”

In the tattoo shop I observed the established artists normally doing a maximum of two clients per day, even if it was smaller tattoos. An exception is a ‘walk-in day’ once a week, when three to four artists make small tattoos for clients with no appointments. Here you have to remember that the Finnish capital where the tattoo shop is located is still a small city in comparison to a city like San Diego and artists would probably not be able to even book too many more clients per any given day. Still, at least the more established artists could certainly make more bookings, but they prefer to take their time with their clients. Also in the studio of my research, all of the artists make most of the preparations themselves, except for general cleaning chores that are done by the shop apprentices.

The owner of the shop describes the situation in terms of his apprentices: “It’s very different here, that’s why I want the guys (the two trainees at the shop) to go to different places to see what’s out there. Here they can do whatever they want and have all the time in the world. But out there in the big world, you do everything that comes through the door.” At one point the shop had a visiting artist from the UK, who described to me how she is used to working in shops where every day is a walk-in day. In Finland the customers’ experience can be very different because there is no tight schedule. Many of the clients come in early for their appointments, discuss the elements of the tattoo with their artists, sometimes even begin the designing there and then. They have coffee in the kitchen area where the other artists might be

eating and chatting, and for many regular customers it's as much of a social event as a personal experience.

What is to be noted here is that while there are many shops in Finland that do several bookings a day per artist and take this sort of in-and-out approach to their customers, usually once a person gets anything a bit more detailed (s)he gets introduced to this more slow paced, personal approach I described above.

Often times I noticed that the tattoo artists acted as what I would call educators. And although the customer experience might be very different from time to time, slowly but surely either by listening to what is being talked in the room or by discussing with your own artist, the consumers will learn about the history of tattooing, the tattoo industry in Finland, all sorts of weird and unusual happenings that have taken place at various different tattoo studios, the design philosophies of the artists, and life in general. And sometimes it might be dead silent for three hours.

Socializing is bound to happen as many Finns choose to go to the same tattoo artist once they find their favourite. The owner of the tattoo shop describes his experiences: "In Finland people are really, somehow loyal. They always go to the same tattooist. I'm telling many of them that they should get tattooed by different people. Then again it's nice to have that commitment ... Most of my clients have been in for many years and it's cool to have a developing relationship with them. So it's also a fun activity (tattooing someone)." In fact, 4 of the 5 customers I interviewed have been getting the majority of their tattoos from their current tattoo artist and plan to continue doing so. The 5th one was a new customer in the shop at the time of my ethnographic research, has since been in twice and told me that she will most likely be going to the same artist in the future. Previous to that she has been tattooed by several different tattoo artists and by her friend at home.

The aspect of loyalty is important to keep in mind throughout reading my research, and certainly could have been an interesting enough topic for a research in itself. For many tattooed people, finding the 'right' tattoo artist has been an important step in their journey as

tattoo enthusiasts. I asked one client, while she was being tattooed, about her tattooist: “It’s easier to count the times I’ve cheated on him. I’ve lived abroad and I had to take some, two or three. It’s been hard for me (to go to anyone else).” As she said this, she clearly was not joking, and looked a bit troubled for a while. A discourse analysis comparing the use of the term ‘cheating’ to the language used for intimate relationships could certainly be warranted here. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) in fact note that these comparisons are existent in current literature.

This story from one of my interviewees sums it all up pretty well: “Another thing (on why he didn’t get tattooed at a younger age) was that I never really had a friend who did tattoos or that type of person... Because the whole process of taking a tattoo is so personal, you have to find the person who speaks the same language than you, sort of ... I went to see a friend of mine, who was being tattooed, and I saw him (his current artist) tattooing and we just clicked. At that same moment I booked my first appointment then ... I had not even seen his previous work and now that I think of what he likes to do generally ... it’s like day and night, comparing my tattoos to that.”

For him, the deciding factor was not to find the right symbolic meaning, or to find the coolest design but meeting the right person: “After (finding the right tattooist) all the other problems went away, ‘what to get and where’ and after that I have never even thought that I would get tired of my tattoos (a previous thought keeping him from getting a tattoo).” He also speaks of how “strange” it would be to have someone else tattoo him, and sees it as highly unlikely, as he has gotten all of his tattoos from the same artist.

GENERATIONAL GAP

Another thing I want to address as a backstory before we get further into my research is the generational gap between most of my interviewees and their parents’ generation. I say most, because with one of my interviewees, who was born in the 1960’s, this did not come up. As for the others, one interviewee was born in the 1970’s and the rest between the years 1980-1990, so their parents belong more or less to the so-called ‘baby-boomer’ generation.

There are many issues that the interviewees have discussed with their parents about tattoos, and even more that they have not. For a lot of people there seems to be a gap of sorts, making it difficult to communicate about something they love to do, which is getting tattooed and being people with tattoos. I will describe this in detail later on, but here it is important to notice that this is an issue that came forward in quite a bit of detail in the aforementioned 5 of the 6 interviews and as such can not be put aside, even though tattoos are consumed by a very wide variety of people, in terms of almost any demographic (Sweetman, 1999).

“I feel like if tattoos were a foreign concept for me, then for my parents they have been even more foreign, that in their youth tattoos really only appeared on prisoners and so on.” This quote describes the situation very well for me, and came up in the context of one of the interviewees telling how he is an over 30-year-old man, still sort of hiding tattoos from his mother, and wondering to himself why that actually is. Even though he never got criticized for his outrageous style choices in his youth, tattoos somehow remain, if not stigmatized, at least as something ‘easier to be left out of conversation’.

For others, the issue has grown into an open conflict and even a wedge between a parent and their child. The psychology 101 –type of worries about getting a job, making it in life, and so on came up with my interviewees and while some even made a point out of how “it is not as bad as it may sound”, I felt compelled to bring this context forward, so that the reader can keep in mind why in many cases the interviewees question their consumption practices and what people think about them, as they often think first about the reactions of their loved ones, or at least this has been the case in the past.

Also, I feel this is something unique to exactly the gap between the ‘baby-boomers’ and generations after them, but certainly there is already a gap of it’s own between people born roughly around the 1980’s and the generation that is reaching adulthood now. One of my interviewees works as an officer in the military and gets a good view of the Finnish youth every 6 months in the form of new recruits: “I have not had a class that would not have at least one or two guys with their neck or backs of their hands tattooed. It’s like, ok, but every time,

you know one or two.” What used to be seen, and still to large extent in the tattoo culture is, as a sort of last step for heavily tattooed people, getting their necks, faces or their hands tattooed, has become increasingly popular as even the chosen action for people getting their first tattoos. This was also easily noticeable during the ‘walk-in’ days as people seemingly casually stopped by at the shop and asked if they could get a highly visible tattoo.

RESEARCHING TATTOO CONSUMERS

To give you a sense of how my research was received by people and what can be derived from those reactions, I will tell that every single person in the tattoo studio that I introduced myself to, allowed me to not only follow the process of them getting a tattoo, but also ask questions during it. Of course this required me to be highly sensitive to clues about when a person wanted to be left alone especially in the middle of the painful tattooing process itself, and also not to distract the tattooist from their work. This being said, with me as a not-so-experienced researcher certainly having pushed the boundaries while getting excited about people and their tattoos, I have the utmost respect towards all of the seven regular tattooists and three visiting tattooists who gave me the space and time to do my extensive research, and all of the clients for being so open and even enthusiastic. During the 24 research days spent at the shop, only one client told me that she “might not be willing or able to answer some of the questions.”

All of the six people I initially asked for an in-depth interview also agreed and became whom I refer to interviewees throughout this paper. Several others offered to be interviewed or said that they are ready to answer any questions via email. I also received a good amount of referrals to both tattoo culture related material from the tattoo artists and academic and other readings from clients. This is partly why I feel that without the extensive ethnographic part of my study, it would have ended up much more shallow. Time consuming, yes, but highly rewarding in terms of both academic knowledge and personal growth.

Last I want to make a point out of how the people I interviewed and talked to reinforced my view that there is certainly a void for this type of research, in terms of it being about tattoo consumption and in the context of marketing or business. During the ethnographic phase

people often assumed that my background would have been in social studies, a field that without a doubt does heavily influence this study as well. Quite a few times I got asked if I was planning to open my own tattoo shop or if I was studying arts. Despite people sometimes having a hard time grasping what exactly my study would aim at and consider, a problem certainly for a lot of academic efforts, what surprised me was how well I was received with my endless amount of questions. Naturally as human beings and social creatures, we are often respectful or even enthusiastic if someone shows an interest in us or what we do, but the world of tattooing is often depicted as rebellious and not caring what other people think. The owner of the shop told me about his feelings when he was starting out as a young tattooist: “And like what it used to be, I didn’t like customer service or anything at all and thought that ‘this is a great job’ because you didn’t have to (laughs). If you had a bad day, then just be an asshole. Everyone was a little like that. Like when I first tattooed my current spouse, she had been thinking after that ‘what an absolute douche’, I’m never going to get tattooed by him again’. And I was just trying to impress her.”

The only time I faced this was when I was looking for a tattoo studio to do my research in, as one other owner replied to me, very politely I have to say, that he would not be interested in having another person around when he is working and that quite honestly he does not care why someone wants to get a tattoo from him. There was also a mention of reality-TV, something that has been portraying tattoo culture in a certain light for a number of years now, a way that feels awkward and cringe-worthy to many of the people I talked to.

But after gaining access, something I am not sure if I would have managed have I not known some of the tattooists beforehand, this whole world of people willing to talk openly and honestly about their experiences opened up to me. For example Goulding et al., (2004), recommend ethnography as a tool to build trust between researchers, tattooists and tattoo consumers specifically. It became clear though that tattooed people in the modern world have enough respect for their life choices to consider tattoos as a worthy and valuable topic for research and do not wish tattooing to remain or be pushed back to back alleys and basements. Especially the three interviewees with academic degrees outlined how they see this issue:

“An interesting topic, and to *this* school, I never would have thought. But I think it’s a good thing, a step ahead in the world of tattoos, if you can do something like this.”

“You can’t say (tattoos) are an emerging culture or art form, whatever it’s categorized as, it’s something that’s here to stay. That won’t change, styles and themes and things like that (might), but I think when you start getting thesis’s or research or any sort of *thinking*, it’s always good.”

As sometimes people wondered how consumption relates to tattoos and saw a disconnection between my background in business and my research subject, it was all the more clear to me that this is exactly what I should be studying. I feel that contemporary tattooing and tattoo consumption is at a place where it is most lucrative from a research point of view. With its history as an underground culture that you really had to pursue to get into, tattooing is now available to everyone, and some would say that it has entered into the mainstream with for example the rise in number of tattooed celebrities. According to a major news outlet, one fifth of young adults in Finland are predicted to have a tattoo in 2020 [1]. Still what I found out was that consumption of tattoos is full of contrasts, complex social and psychological structures, but also straightforward narratives, things that do not really make sense to anyone else but the consumers themselves, and most of all meanings relating not to individual tattoos (objects of consumption) but to the fact that people live with them for the rest of their lives and go through the whole spectrum of life experiences with those tattoos. What I found out was these crazy and at the same time ordinary journeys that are a mixture of everything. These journeys I have curated in the next chapters relating to contemporary marketing theories, especially Consumer Culture Theory, to give the reader a deeper understanding of what consumers do and think.

COMPLEXITY OF CONSUMPTION

This chapter comprises of four smaller parts.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

One unique feature of tattoo consumption is that it is both private and public by nature (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). Private in the sense that it is quite literally part of you, with the tattoo on your skin, and arguably most of tattoos remain covered and hidden from others, therefore being something very personal and possibly revealed to only people close to you. On the other hand, tattoos are attention grabbing, as they are very noticeable on bare skin when not covered. Furthermore, as tattoos have entered the so-called mainstream, more visible tattoos also become more common, say tattoos on one's arms, legs, or even hands and necks. This is also supported by my own observations in the field, as many young consumers came in asking to get their hands or neck tattooed, sometimes without previous experience of tattoos. To the amazement and bafflement of the tattoo artists, I must say, often leading to the artist turning the customer away for two reasons – firstly, by experience knowing that there is high chance of regretting the tattoo later, and secondly (the more pressing reason as many of the customers were adamant in their choice) that the quality of work would not be good in an area of the body such as your knuckles.

“It feels like nowadays young people take a tattoo so they can *show it* to other people. Then the old customers, who are collectors or have a lot of tattoos, are not interested to show them to anyone. I have a friend who has *a lot* of tattoos, a collector, who has been asked to do all kinds of magazine articles so that his tattoos would be showing and he always says ‘there’s no way, I’m not interested to show these to anyone, they’re mine’”.

- The owner of the studio

The description above definitely holds some truth to it in the sense that there is a generational gap as well and tattoo culture is transforming, but it also fits to many consumers I spoke with,

regardless of their age. For some, tattoos and/or tattooing is a very private thing, and for others it can even turn into a public spectacle like we see later in this part.

The owner of the shop continues to tell me about his personal experiences, and with being covered in tattoos he has had quite a few of them. It would be easy to say that because he has many visible tattoos, he wants them to be seen, but this is not the case and should not be the assumption. “Me too, well it’s hard to cover the backs of one’s hands but often I wear long sleeves. It’s just easier... It’s just easier, you know because it draws certain type of people, annoying people, so it’s just easier. That’s why I don’t go to any bars, I haven’t been in years because... It was *always*, people coming like “what do you have there...” (stares at my arm closely and touches it around). Then if someone knew that I’m a tattooist, the drunks come like “I have this idea and...” I always told them to come to the shop sober, told that I’m off work. They wouldn’t leave you alone.”

I barely get an expression on my face as he goes on, and I can see that this has happened countless times to him. “Still if I go, very rarely, out, *every time* someone is like ‘why do you have this and that’ and I’m like ‘I don’t know, it’s cool’. Why would anyone care? It’s a god damn tattoo.” “And they’re like: ‘yeah, I too have one here’ giving me a half-hour lecture about what it means and how deep the story behind it is and I could care less. Like, let’s just keep them to ourselves.” To bring up the fact that these experiences can differentiate very much between consumers, another interviewee, younger in age and with arguably less tattoos than the shop owner, but still having large visible tattoos, told me: “Not really, no one ever asks if there’s a story behind them or anything like that. I’ve never had that conversation”. Being a tattooed person is an individual experience for everyone and I feel it important to remind the reader of this throughout this paper.

Indeed a unique feature of tattoos is that you might not be able to hide them at all, much like plastic surgery in some cases, distinctively different from a lot of other forms of consumption. And it truly changes the nature of consumption, as it is almost omnipresent, often times letting people define you in a certain way or make them interact with you in a certain way, without

your consent. You might consider your tattoos personal and private, but they draw public attention to you.

And sometimes this interaction can take inappropriate forms, as was described above with people touching my interviewee's arms at bars. Another interviewee, a woman in her twenties, reinforces this is the case with an incredibly similar discourse: "One weird conception people have, maybe it's the same with pregnant women, but they think that it's ok to pull your hand and lift your shirt like 'what do you have here'. I don't like it, my personal space is huge and I can't stand it when someone strokes my hand. You can ask me to show something but like that ... it's mostly when people are drunk, it's very common."

People seem to have the idea that by having a tattoo, they are invited to look at it, and sometimes as incredible as it sounds, to touch it. There seems to be a distinct notion that the tattoos are separate from the person, objects. This feels different to plastic surgery, which I mentioned above, or even piercings. And what I want to point out is that this is something consumers have little control over. Surely you can cover up your tattoos at times, and a lot of people do. But it is a social issue, one very interesting to me if you think what consumption is by nature and how it affects our surroundings. Sometimes, whether we like it or not, it affects how people behave and private and personal things are forced to be in the centre of public conversations and social behaviour. Patterson and Schroeder (2010, p. 260) report of similar instances happening to especially heavily tattooed women, and gender could play a role here, even though for my interviewees, both men and women reported similar stories.

Another interviewee of mine, a man in his thirties, gets positive attention with his tattoos a lot, and the interactions are quite similar to the ones above in terms of the topic of consumption being private and public at the same time. "I think the most unusual place where I get comments from people is at the gym, in the sauna or the locker room. There's clearly nothing sexual ... but like if you're taking a shower and someone starts commenting (tattoos on your body), you're like 'umm, just wait a moment and I'll wash my hair and let's talk in the sauna' (laughs). That's where people ask questions, it's funny." On a side note, you will notice that the sauna will come up a few times in this paper as a place where people discuss their tattoos

and this is surely a distinctive character of the Finnish culture and actually hugely helpful for my study as the sauna is not only a place where people can see each others tattoos, but many times a place where they feel comfortable talking about these issues that borderline the public and private as subject matters. The interviewees often referenced these talks, and one even distinctively remembered his first encounters with tattoos as a child happening in public saunas. A centrepiece of Finnish culture, surely to come up in any sort of qualitative research but in an interesting and beneficial fashion with mine.

Sometimes the act of tattooing and the fact that you are getting a tattoo can be viewed from this same perspective. Often a private occasion in the sense that you are alone getting tattooed, perhaps having a discussion with your tattooist but ultimately having what has been described (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010, p.258) as even an intimate experience. But at times, especially now that tattoo studios are not just what they used to be for example in New York up until arguably 1997 when the law banning tattooing was removed – small dark places of business with a no frills, not-so-friendly attitude of customer service, tattoo studios fill up with friends or relatives of people getting tattooed, there are events with a more festive atmosphere, and generally once you get introduced to the culture of a tattoo shop they can be very inviting. With their distinctive characters and charming quirks of course. So it is possible to hear stories of a crowd of friends coming in with a person who is getting a tattoo, possibly a first tattoo like one of my interviewees described: “I had a huge group of friends with me (laughs) ... It was a big deal for everyone”. A lot of people also get tattooed at the same time to mark an occasion for example, with different or similar designs.

Or if your friends are not physically present, getting a tattoo can still very much be a social thing. The same interviewee describes when he was starting out his first large tattoo project, a full-sleeve Japanese design, years and a few other tattoos after the first one: “If the first tattoo was a *show*, this was also a show. I didn’t have anyone with me but if (my friends) didn’t hear from me for a while, I got messages asking when there’s going to be new colours and so on and everyone was interested. I was the first from our group of friends who got such a big tattoo and so on.”

Next I will be talking about how especially social reactions affect tattooed peoples lives. We saw already that tattoos can affect one's behaviour, as one interviewee explained how he does not like to go out to the same places he used to before. But how else does the nature of tattoos being somewhat public affect people? Do tattooed people really care what other people think?

OPINIONS OF OTHERS

As we saw, tattoo consumption interestingly affects personal and public space, and as such it often brings forward questions, opinions, doubt, anxiety, approval, an endless list of reactions from other people and people's own thoughts. Here I will go through some of the most vivid explanations by, and insights into the lives of, my interviewees and the social communications they have had with other people. How do these individuals, consumers, go about their life with seemingly so many opinionated people critiquing or applauding their choices, or is it actually just in their heads? This will also act as a good introduction to the mindset of my interviewees and helps to understand discussions later on in this paper.

Tattoos certainly can be provocative by nature, due to their subject matters, connotations or the sheer fact that they are a visual stimulus, something that you notice. Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) argue that tattoos can be hard to make sense of if you are not used to them, by saying that "the ambiguity surrounding tattoos arouses a degree of moral panic." Patterson and Schroeder (2010) say that tattoos as well as other "embodied identity statements, when visible, retain a polysemic quality that leaves them always open to multiple interpretations." While most people might not show any feelings towards them at casual encounters, tattoos can be met with a range of reactions, including a sort of panic, as dire as it sounds. Often the first reactions that tattooed people are confronted with are the ones from their friends and family.

One of my interviewees went through the emotional scale in one day, when he was getting his first tattoo at the age of 17. "I had a huge group of friends with me (laughs)... It was a big deal for everyone (he gets notably excited and starts to smile), that 'now he's going to get a tattoo' ... It was an exciting moment, and it didn't hurt as much as I thought." At home, the reactions were a bit different. "I was 17, went without telling my mother, and well, she doesn't like it at

all, she raged at me when I got home... she still doesn't like it, even though it has been such a long time (around 10 years)."

I am sure all of us have had their ideas questioned by our parents, even more so during our teenage years, but what I especially notice in terms of tattoo consumption is the troubling and mixed feelings many of my interviewees are dealing with, often times years ahead.

For the same person, the story continues over 10 years later. I asked him about whether he ever purposefully covers his tattoos: "Sometimes I do, depends on the situation and occasion. For example I don't ever visit my grandparents without a long sleeve shirt." We are talking about a man whose upper body is quite heavily tattooed as he has a full sleeve Japanese design on his other arm, and colourful old-school designs all around his other arm. His chest is also tattooed, but all of that would be covered with a buttoned-up shirt. I ask him further about why he chooses to cover them specifically when visiting his grandparents: "Yeah, well, they don't accept tattoos and..." At this point he gets a bit dispirited and it clearly means a great deal to him. "Actually I think my grandmother knows that I have (some) tattoos, but my grandfather does not ... Yeah I think my mother has told her but grandfather has been saved from it..." "And I see them relatively often. That also affects whether I dare to get the backs of my hands or neck tattooed and so on. It's like, even though I'm not *ashamed* by it, somehow in my mind I don't want to do it to my *grandparents*. I've been ... because they think that... I don't want them to be disappointed in me."

As I listen to him it is clear to me that this is something he wonders often. I cannot help but wonder how difficult it is for people to not only keep such a big part of their lives hidden but to have a fear of disapproval. I ask him whether there has been talk about tattoos with his grandparents: "I remember my grandmother once commenting about a guy, saying 'that looks terrible'. We've never really talked about it though... I don't really know why this has gone this far (laughs)."

A similar situation is discussed with the shop owner as I interview him. He has certainly heard a few of these stories and weighs in: "One customer who had a hell of a lot of tattoos told me

that their grandparents had never seen them. (S)he said: ‘but this summer was so hot and I stayed for so long at the countryside that I had to take my shirt off’, and they had liked the tattoos. I think a lot of people have a preconception that others won’t approve ... A lot of 30-40-year-olds can be like ‘no, my mom wouldn’t accept’ or ‘grandmother wouldn’t understand, let’s wait until she dies’ (laughs). It’s like, are you living your life for yourself or someone else?”

The shop owner himself has faced a similar situation when he was younger, and his parents came around after seeing that tattoos can legitimately provide a living for him. And here lies a notion I got from all of my interviewees, no matter how accepted or rejected their consumption practice was, at some point or continuously, they have felt like they have to somehow explain themselves or legitimize their tattoo consumption. I wanted to learn and hear more, what these people were faced with; doing something they love, getting tattoos.

As was discussed, there is no doubt an element of people’s own preconceptions working against themselves as all of our realities are essentially flawed by the fact that they are our own and not ever fully aware of what the reality is for others. What I think happens though, is that these preconceptions are reinforced by small cues that we get from other people. An overheard comment here and there, a TV-show or a column about regretting tattoos [2], anything really.

For one of my interviewees, a mother of two in her early thirties, small cues of what other people think are mostly amusing or a little annoying, but very well represent the atmosphere around the subject of tattoos. After we discussed the fact that sometimes we might assume what other people think, she wanted to share a few stories that have happened to her lately: “I know (that it’s not just in her head), because I keep hearing... I have this one friend for example, who might say things like ‘yeah, my mother said that you’re already over 20, you’re not going to take a tattoo, that is teenage stuff’. In a way that is a critique, maybe she does not realize it, or maybe she does...” My interviewee has tattoos all over her other arm, a sort of a collection that comes together as a full sleeve, and fairly visible tattoos on her other arm as

well. It is safe to assume that all of the people she talks about here have seen most of her tattoos at some point.

She continues to tell me about her friends: “Just last weekend we were out with friends and went to the sauna, and they had not seen my latest (tattoo). One of them said, ‘oh, you’ve taken that, yeah yeah. I’ve been thinking as well, but I don’t know, anyway if you take something, you’re going to regret it when you’re 40 or 50, you’re going to change your mind’. It was like general knowledge to her.”

Talking to your friends in the sauna is one thing, but these not-no-subtle types of Freudian slips can occur in more formal situations as well. The same interviewee has been working as a teacher for a few years now: “An older male colleague of mine also asked me at work, ‘what, you have tattoos too?’ And when I told him that I do, he was like ‘oh, are they some teenage mistakes?’ Like that’s his first comment. I told him that my last one is a week old.”

Those types of comments begin to show the lack of knowledge of who the contemporary tattoo consumer is. While arguably tattoos are visible in the mainstream, a certain type of ignorance is clearly present. Sometimes tattoo consumption is connected to things that seemingly have no affiliation with each other. This is quite bluntly portrayed by a discussion that followed from me asking about the financial costs of tattooing and if that has ever been an issue for my interviewee: “Some people have been like ‘Oh, now you wanted that big tattoo’, that, ‘but your baby is so young still’. It’s like, umm, what do these two things have to do with each other. Somehow when you are a mother, you shouldn’t be interested in yourself anymore.” She is quite visibly and understandably frustrated with this and elaborates: “That you should use all (of your time and money) on your child, and I disagree. I think your own mental well-being and self-expression are as important if not more ... when you put someone else’s needs in front of yours all the time, in a way, it’s important to think about yourself every now and then.” She goes on to tell me how she has less time for gaming and her other hobbies now that her children are still pre-schoolers and tattoos have offered her a form of self-expression and something that is just for her to enjoy.

The comments and critique, meant as such or not, have forced my interviewee to reflect upon how her consumption habit is viewed and why people are so vocal about it. “I also think that the people who criticize tattoos the most, have a fixation about not *daring to get one*, so they have to criticize people who have them. If you put so much effort into talking and passing judgement on people, usually you’re just somehow jealous of what they have. Because why else would you pay attention to something, if it’s stupid and ridiculous. I don’t talk about things that don’t interest me.” Referencing her friend I mentioned earlier who was worried about her own mother’s opinion, my interviewee continues to tell about how she has learned to put more emphasis on her subjective view: “But then again I feel pity for those people who live this restricted life, always thinking about what other people think and that you should live for example really according to gender standards, so I don’t really need acceptance from those people.”

As you are faced with this social commentary, you learn to navigate through it without it causing you too much emotional trouble. Sometimes though it can affect people around you, as my interviewee cheerfully tells me how her husband perhaps acts protective over her: “My husband always tells me how he gets irritated about comments (about tattooed people and tattoos) on message boards online, even though he doesn’t have a single tattoo. I’m always telling him to let it go, that it doesn’t matter!”

Sometimes though, it is not possible to dismiss people’s opinions and comments as they become more aggressive and personal. Another interviewee, a woman in her mid-twenties with several visible tattoos on her upper body, has gone through quite a bit of scrutiny over her looks, especially relating to piercings and tattoos. “I’ve noticed so many times that people get provoked, I’ve been told many times (comments about her appearance), by grown-up people, which raises questions... That yea, I’m a tattooed person but I have manners and I respect people.” I asked her to give an example of these comments, and was not quite expecting the answer to be so, vivid. “I don’t even know how many times when I used to work as a cashier and had more piercings than now. What you heard there... ‘Have I been shot in the face with a shotgun?’ I remember this one guy coming in always with his kid, saying ‘look that girl went fishing, she’s been shot in the face with a shotgun, she has car parts on her face’. One time I

said to him ‘are you serious, is that the way you are raising your child, take a look at yourself, you have no manners.’ After that he never said anything about my appearance.” It is hard to imagine a grown man speaking to his child in this manner in any situation, let alone speaking about a teenager in a public place. While marketing theory usually sees individuals as free to choose what they consume (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010, p. 254), this example clearly shows that consumption can raise emotions high and consumers are facing very real critique about their choices. “People, when they’re sober it’s mostly old guys ... the word ‘scribble’ I hear a lot, but if you think about what you hear when you go out at night, when people have had a few drinks, I’ve had guys come up to me saying ‘you look fucking disgusting.’”

And the range of basis for this, critique, for the lack of a better word, is wide to say the least. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) found that heavily tattooed women often have to “justify their actions (by constructing narratives of personalized meaning around their tattoos)”, but in this case the reaction seems to be more of an emotional outburst than a plea to justify something. For another interviewee the issue takes not only a personal but also a spiritual stance. He, among various other things, is a religious man (a Harley Davidson riding one, I have to add). In his fifties, built tall and big, according to his own words “usually wearing the vest” (a leather vest with a notable patch pointing out that he indeed is a biker and a missionary of sorts), he has a certain presence of authority about him, ever so notable in the small rooms of the tattoo studio whenever he was present. And this is quite often as he is slowly but surely completing his full Japanese-style body suit, an armour-like design encompassing almost the whole body.

This man of many words, often leaving me puzzled, intrigued, and furiously trying to write up my notes, talked to me quite a bit about people passing judgement on others and how he tries to convey a message of not criticizing others in his sermons. He has been confronted by a lot of religious people condemning his tattoos. For him they represent a way to do his work, something I will talk in a later chapter, but here I want to bring up the brief but powerful reasoning he has been given, that “the devil can enter (me) through them (his tattoos)”.

I feel like it is hard for me to decide what to make of this. While surely there are many consumers that come across judgements relating to how they look or what the object of consumption represents, this is surely an extreme example. I mostly want this sort of behaviour to be recognized and hopefully by doing so help put it in the past. From a theoretical point of view, I think it is really interesting to recognize the hardship that these consumers face because they do something that they love. And as I talk next, how these consumers have the confidence to keep doing what they love.

I have to emphasize that for all of the critique or negativity that tattoo consumers might face, they get positive reinforcement as well. During the conversations with my interviewees, the critique usually gained more attention, which is natural as it is more extreme compared to the compliments. Ruotsalainen (2005) mentions though that the social scientific view is that in spoken interviews, “people not only tell about what happened, but about what they want to remember now”, so I have tried to give as much weight and space to issues in this paper as the interviewees themselves gave them during my interviews.

One of my interviewees tells about his experience, and it perfectly describes the contrast between what different consumers face. As consumers navigate the world in a different environment, each has their individual experiences, journeys if you will. “Generally I get a lot of comments and people look, but I can’t remember anything negative, everything has been positive. I’ve never been told to cover my tattoos at work or anywhere.” He later adds that mobile dating apps are the only place where people have told him that they do not accept tattoos. Even then he thinks that this is because of the anonymous medium: “If I saw the same person in a bar and we would talk, I don’t think they would turn around and leave if I rolled my sleeves up.”

This brings together what I wanted to say in this chapter. If I would have a graphic here, it would be a circle, or rather a sphere where you could place these experiences I have described. As one consumer faces open critique at her workplace, one thinks that her own preconceptions are what have been troubling her at her workplace, and for one it has never been an issue to think at work. For another all of the above might have happened at some point. Understanding

how complex and differentiated the consumption experience can be for the consumers of practically the same thing, tattoos are better portrayed through bringing forward their unique stories and letting me as the researcher or you as the reader interpret them differently. Also important to keep in mind is that those experiences are tightly connected to the ongoing lives of these consumers, and various objects of consumption such as individual tattoos can acquire new meanings throughout their lives, as we can see in later chapters.

GAINING CONFIDENCE

In this part of the chapter I will discuss some of the complexities of tattoo consumption, what sort of doubts the consumers have overcome and how they have become what I would call confident consumers. Confident tattoo consumers could be appropriate, as all of my interviewees are very confident in their chosen consumption habit (at the moment), despite some of the opposition we talked in the previous part. There are still both internal (one's own) and external (other people's) opinions that affect how these people act, and we will go through some of those as well.

As with many forms of consumption, one cannot be an expert without actually owning and living with said objects of consumption. For many, the initial step to becoming a tattooed person is a rite in itself (Schouten, 1991), one that is gone through without much knowledge of what lies ahead. Tattooing is also still surrounded by a veil of mysticism (how thick or thin, depends on where you are in the world), at least in the sense that misleading, or confusing information can be available on major medias [3] and in many places for example it seems that the tattoo artists themselves are the leading professionals on health and safety regulations, that are imposed on them by government institutions. And as a lot of the factual matters such as health risks remain up for debate according to some [3], it is sure that the cultural knowledge is still very much buried inside the tattoo studios, their bookshelves and the tattoo artists' stories. This tacit knowledge is slowly being brought available for the general public through books and the Internet, but in a very limited capacity compared to almost any other industry. Tapping into this tacit knowledge is the key for many consumers to discovering what their interests might be. Almost all of my interviewees have gone through different styles and years

of having tattoos, finally settling for a certain style or a tattooist. Worth mentioning is, that of the six interviewees I conducted longer interviews with, five have not been getting tattooed by anyone else since finding the studio I did my research in. And the sixth interviewee is the owner of the studio, who himself gets tattooed mostly by his friends all over the world. Only one of the five has gotten all of his tattoos by the same artist, as all of the others have gone through three or more tattoo studios or tattooists. At least one interviewee brought up that she also has homemade tattoos.

We will be seeing more stories of people getting their first tattoos on the following chapters, as there is often more to it than ‘just getting a tattoo’. For now I want to focus on the instances that have made my interviewees more confident about their consumption, more sure that they really like tattoos and that they do not have to care what other people think. Or do they?

“I think I was 19, a lot of people got one when they were 16 but I didn’t really know what I wanted.” The owner of the studio tells me that he went through some shops starting at the age of 16 but could not really find the traditional style tattoos he was already attracted to back then (he still specializes in making ‘old school’ or traditional tattoos and only gets tattoos in that style for himself as a tattoo consumer). “No I didn’t (want just *a tattoo*). Nowadays it’s more people just getting something. I thought a lot about my first ones, which is stupid, you shouldn’t think too much.” He tells me that nowadays he likes the tattoos he got impulsively the most: “They are not too serious”. One of his favourites he got recently from a Danish tattoo artist, ‘Tattoo-Andy’, who used to work for the tattooist Ole Hansen who famously tattooed the Danish King Frederik IX (Life magazine, 1951, see attachment 1). “Well for example the ship that the old man did, like ‘do what you want’, no drawing or stencils, just straight up with the machine. Then he did a ship.” Previous research on tattoo consumption can be critiqued of jumping into conclusions and overgeneralizing, as for example with Velliquette, Murray, and Creyer (1998, p. 462) who say that “it is expected that impulsive decision to acquire a tattoo will more often lead to regret and dissatisfaction.” This is one example, but I advise against using this sort of logic of reasoning, without sufficiently explaining the context, or at least providing a case example.

It is rare for someone to have a sense of what style of tattoos they like at such a young age. He also mentions that he knew he wanted to become a tattoo artist before ever tattooing someone. For him though, the lack of confidence led to him “thinking too much”. Taking his time getting his first tattoo was not about being sure that he would not regret it but more about style and the fact that no one really did the American style traditional tattoos here in Finland at the time. This is ultimately what led to him starting his own tattoo studio, as it was the only way to do exactly what he wanted. That and the fact that no one could afford to have him as an apprentice in the handful of private studios that existed at the time. And by studio, I mean the back room of another company that he ran simultaneously, that only later expanded to the whole space and by now, over 15 years later, also to the space next door.

The uncertainty also translated to his profession when he was starting out, contradictory to the fact that he was seemingly sure what he wanted as a consumer: “At first you really tried to look for your own style, you got excited about everything. You saw cool styles and new things, but then you tried them out and somehow I always went back to the traditional. It became like, ‘I don’t want my own style at all’, yeah, you do shading and colours in a certain way, because you are used to, and that’s just how it goes.” Further on he explains what the ‘traditional’ tattooing philosophy is to him: “What I have always done is, if you want this or that, I draw it to portray whatever it really is and then when you do heavy lines and heavy shadings, it will simplify the design so that it works as a tattoo. That’s it, traditional style.”

Consumption can interestingly intertwine with things like your profession or other interests. For the shop owner, him becoming a professional tattooist has reinforced his view of what he likes to consume, stylistically and in terms of craftsmanship, but also helped him overcome his hesitation to just pick a design that he likes from a sheet of flash (pre-designed drawings made by tattoo artists that can be fairly easily traced for tattooing) for example. Being able to bring the elements that he likes as a consumer into his work, still taking into consideration the clients, has really helped him develop a following of loyal customers who are getting various different styles from him, all done in that traditional manner.

For one of those clients, his background and various creative positions also have had everything to do with aesthetics as he has worked on everything from styling theatre shows to creating visual identities for large multinational companies. He tells me that he had been thinking of getting tattoos from a young age, but never really settled on a particular design. Later on we will discuss how aesthetics are a vital part of tattoo consumption in the chapter 'Aesthetic', but now I want to focus on how tattoos seem to have a unique character when compared to consumption generally.

“Having worked with clothing, I still can’t stand to have any clothing visible at home, everything has to be inside closets. Everyone keeps suggesting me to have a rack to hang my clothes on, and that’s the worst thing I can imagine, those *damn clothes* hanging there.” After all, he has a degree in clothing design. I ask whether he ever gets the same feeling with tattoos: “No, no. That’s probably the biggest reason I didn’t get them (younger) ... Now that I think of it, maybe I just wasn’t ready and mature enough then and it’s only a good thing that I didn’t force it.” Much like with his tattooist, he certainly liked tattoos for a long time but didn’t get one until later. Coincidentally both of them describe that finding the right tattoo artist was the key.

“This one guy did them at home. He used to tattoo all the punks and hardcore guys back then (laughs), he was the guy... that everyone got tattooed by ... straight away (after the first tattoo) I got another one from the same guy in his studio ... I went around some shops yea since I was like 16 ... but somehow they, somehow I was attracted to the traditional ones and here you couldn't find... That guy was the only one who did roughly that.”

“I went to see one of my friends who was being tattooed at (the studio), and I saw him (his current tattooist) tattooing and we just clicked. At the same moment I booked my first appointment then ... I hadn’t even seen his previous work and now that I think of what he likes to do generally ... it’s like day and night, comparing my tattoos to that ... After (finding the right tattooist) all the other problems went away, ‘what to get and where’ and after that I’ve never even thought that I would get tired of my tattoos.”

I find it fascinating how pretty much everyone I talked to had even long periods of time when they were sure that they wanted to get tattooed but faced different kinds of problems and questions until they either found a certain style, a certain tattooist, a certain tattoo studio, talked to a friend that guided them to the right direction; these stories are literally endless in amount as almost everyone I talked to had one to tell. Yes, there are some people who have gotten spontaneously tattooed at a young age and continued on the same path with the same type of tattoos, but especially for my six interviewees, they went through a rather long period, with or without tattoos, until they found their current, I guess style would be the fitting word here. Or what I would call confidence, as consumers. Because they all seem to now be confident in their tattoo consumption, that what they are currently getting, buying, whatever you want to call it, is just right for them. And I have to mention that in the context of consumption, for my interviewees, tattoo consumption in terms of spending is close to a no-holds-barred type of process. It would be easy to point out here that many of them have spent thousands, if not tens of, but in honour of all of my interviewees never mentioning a price of a tattoo or monetary spending unless brought forward by me, I purposefully do not want to discuss the specific economics of tattoo spending.

What I will write on the topic is these few quotes by my interviewees, and let you as the reader make your own conclusion about how important they find tattoo consumption in relation to what else they could spend their money on. Because after all, almost everything can be categorized as consumption (Rumbo, 2002, p. 144) and we make a choice, consciously or unconsciously. And I bring this up now because I think that the confidence that these consumers have gained shows through. They are not ashamed or even seemingly thinking about how much money they are spending.

“I can spend like *a lot* of money on tattoos, it’s such a long time before it becomes a big amount. I don’t really think that ‘I’ve used this much money on tattoos’, it doesn’t really scare me ... everything else sort of comes first, but then there’s this *burning fever* all the time.”

“My whole body *will be* tattooed. Even if I’ll be getting the last tattoo when I’m 80.”

“Live everyday like it’s your last and just get tattoos”

Literally tattoos can be something that a person would get more of on their last day on earth. Sure, you could argue that it was said jokingly, but I bet you would not argue it with the guy who said it in the same room. And I do not think it a coincidence that he is also probably the most tattooed person of my interviewees. Whether it is the simple fact that once you have a certain amount of tattoos, there is really no going back, or something else, these consumers have a level of commitment and confidence in themselves that is admirable, even to people who dislike the idea of getting tattooed themselves. And as we will see in the next part, even that can change.

For now let us get back to times and situations when my interviewees were still unsure, and to be fair, some still are to an extent. “Before we got married, I’d always thought that I’m not going to tattoo my hands, that there’s going to be these old ‘grannies and grandpas’ from small towns and I don’t want to shock them, so I wouldn’t get anything before that.” The mother of two, who has now been married for quite a while did end up waiting though the ceremony and after that got a small tattoo on her wrist “kind of impulsively”. During the interview she reflected on those past thoughts and how she now feels different.

“The older you get, all the more confident you somehow become of *yourself* and what you want to look like. In a way, my tattoos or skin are not anyone else’s business, not my grandmother’s or anyone’s ... now I don’t really care at all, after I sort of grew over it or got this confidence that ‘I don’t care’ ... I don’t really want to think about it anymore, and sort of after you get over a certain point, you’re somehow annoyed, like, ‘why have I even been thinking about this stuff’, it’s crazy in a way, to think about other people’s opinions when they don’t really matter.”

As we saw in the last part, what others think and what you think they might think can truly have an impact on people. And as we talked, tattoos have an interesting character, borderlining a personal and public status. One major thing I realized during my research was that people with tattoos tend to think them as part of their persona, their personality, even their being,

while others often think them as an addition, even a distraction, something that changes one's personality. I heard several comments like this, which one of the interviewees actually repeated two times during the interview: "It's really hard for me to imagine myself without tattoos, really hard." Velliquette et al. (1998) present that some tattoo consumers purposefully change their image and want to become someone different. My research does not support this "simulated self theme", at least in a subjective sense, that the consumers would themselves think that. This is not to say that the phenomenon would not exist, possibly even my interviewees unconsciously or without me seeing it, are trying to become someone different.

An interesting notion here is that a tattooed person can still view other people's tattoos as something that changes that person's personality. The same interviewee said further on when we were talking about facial tattoos that "There isn't going to be one on my face ... I'm a 100% sure ... I think it somehow changes your persona so much if you have (tattoos) on your face, people somehow begin to look different ... Even if you're tattooed from neck to toe, I think so (that it is a big leap)."

I think the lowest level of understanding the relationship that tattooed people have with their tattoos is to not view the tattoos as static objects, something we heard in the previous part strangers sometimes doing, when they would be touching or commenting on someone else's appearance because of their tattoos (or body modifications). Of course, people could take it personally if you touched their shoes for example or made a rude comment about them, those shoes might be the most valuable thing they own. But with tattoos, I would argue that they are always personal for people, more or less so than they are willing to admit. Many of my interviewees are aware of this and told me that they have made a conscious effort of trying to free themselves of any judgment passed on other tattooed people.

"I've learned to not judge anyone's tattoos, even though it happens sometimes. For that person it can be so important, remind them of a certain moment, you never know. Why someone got something, so..."

“Somehow I try to think about tattoos or anything, that I can’t define what’s important to someone else, I can’t say ‘that’s stupid’ (laughs), like no... That it’s not my business, I’d rather hear why they got something ... someone might get a barbed wire design because their dad had one like it. You can’t ever really know.” She continues, looking a bit troubled: “Maybe I’m a bit of an elitist ... I appreciate really well made tattoos and certain styles. Maybe that’s prejudice from my part, which is not good, you shouldn’t think like that about anything. Well, we’re human after all (laughs).”

I wish you could hear the tone of my interviewees voice shift as she was clearly going through this thinking process in her head at the same time the words were coming out of her mouth. It is impossible to not empathize with her cause of trying her hardest to not judge anything at all. As funny as it may be, it shows the sort of thinking that she has gone through, while living her life as a tattooed person. These thoughts surely originate from all of the comments she has heard, all of the “Can I?” “Should I?” questions she has had, and interactions with other tattooed people, consumers and tattoo artists, something that you are bound to experience as tattoos take a good while to make and you have to be present during the process (at least physically), a unique feature in terms of consumer goods, that consumption by nature exposes you to the larger culture surrounding it.

As I said, tattooed people very much feel that tattoos are an essential part of them, again I would draw comparisons to Heidegger’s ‘Being-in-the-world’ philosophy as tattoos can not, in my opinion, be viewed as separate from the person. To use Heideggerian terminology, you discover the world by being, a tattooed person. And you project yourself towards different possibilities, as a tattooed person. (Dreyfus, 1991)

Mary Warnock (1970) makes a great effort to explain further what Heidegger meant: “All human beings are continually oriented towards their own potential, among which are the possibilities of authentic and inauthentic existence. If, whilst moving forward, the standards and beliefs and prejudices of society are embraced, individuals may fail to differentiate themselves from the masses. This, Heidegger regarded as living an ‘inauthentic’ existence. Further, for Heidegger, ‘authentic’ existence can only come into being when individuals arrive

at the realization of who they are and grasp the fact that each human being is a distinctive entity. Once human beings realize that they have their own destiny to fulfil, then their concern with the world will no longer be the concern to do as the masses do, but can become an ‘authentic’ concern to fulfil their real potentiality in the world.”

I guess Heidegger would say that as long as my interviewees have not ‘arrived to the realization’ of who they are, and perhaps let beliefs and prejudices restrict them, they are living an inauthentic existence. That may sound a bit harsh, but let me guide you through a few selected discussions with one of my interviewees, keeping Heidegger’s thinking and Warnock’s words in mind.

During an interview, we had been discussing how tattoos can draw negative attention and how my interviewee feels conflicted at times. “If I go out, I try to behave extra nicely so that anyone can’t say ‘there’s that tattooed person, behaving bad like that, they’re all the same ... You can get a feeling that you’re a second class citizen.” Like I have said, sometimes you can have a preconception of what other people think, but often times these feelings are warranted. As we talk about her current workplace she tells me about a rather unusual conversation with her colleague: “Just this one guy at work who I got to know, we were talking and he said that “I don’t know, when I first saw you, by your looks I thought you’re some kind of a junkie.”

Further on, she told me how she has found a good friend from that workplace, another young woman who is much like her, without the tattoos: “The same guy, there’s a girl at work who I always laugh and make some noise with, this 19-year-old really beautiful, sort of girl-next-door type. The guy told me that ‘I think that she’s this really nice, a kind of girl-next-door. And I was like ‘oh, and I’m the junkie’, there the contrast is just really clear.” Defining yourself can be difficult if other people keep telling you unpleasant and conflicting things.

“And even though I look *like this* ... I’m always dressing up in nice clothing and have my hair and make up done and everything. I look quite ordinary, but then again different, so it makes me wonder how people have the nerve to come up and... and they’re always guys. Always men, and then online, that’s a whole different world ... I think it tells more about the people

who say things like that straight to my face. Of course you can have opinions and the fact that I post any kind of photos, I bring about that judgement in people with my looks.” I ask her if she thinks that she is in fact the cause for this and she answers positively and continues to tell how, like it is a given to her, a fact that she has learned.

These experiences have left her if not cynical, with a ‘me against the world’ type of an approach, and who could blame her. I am sure there are other consumers besides tattoo consumers who face similar judgement, but that does not lessen her experiences. Still, she is certain of her choices and does not let this stand in her way, which is admirable for sure. And it must be said that she emphasizes that for all of the negativity, there is much positive affirmation and non-judgemental attitudes from for example her employers. Nevertheless, the negative reactions stand out from many of the interviews.

What I did not find during my research was what for example Velliquette et al. (2006) describe as “coping individuals” (p. 47), people that would have had to struggle with their feelings toward their own tattoo consumption. I recognize the sentiment that Velliquette et al. portray in their article about people having to meet conflicting social reactions especially as they move between cultural contexts while getting older, but this does not seem to be the case with more heavily tattooed people like my interviewees, who have found confidence for their tattoo consumption, despite social reactions. Now, psychoanalytic studies such as Lemma (2010) would argue that often people could have developed a tough exterior that they present also in interviews, but I would not be capable to make such an analysis about any of my interviewees. What I am certain about is that my interviewees have found tattoo consumption to give them energy and confidence and that is why they have no intention to stop getting more tattoos at least for a good while.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

In the last part of this chapter, I want to discuss and showcase how attitudes towards tattoos and tattooed people can change. It is hard to say whether tattooed people have an underlying willingness to change attitudes from my small sample size, but what I will say is that I

experienced only openness during my research. Tattooed people are not really looking to actively convince someone to accept their consumption or culture, but they are more than willing to help you understand if you so wish. The general surface of the tattoo industry and people working in it can be a bit rough or even crude, and like any modern industry, there is certainly a bit of everything for everyone.

One good example for myself personally was a tattoo exhibition I visited in Finland during my research. It felt to me like I had stepped inside one of the major American tattoo magazines you used to see inside tattoo studios. There were half naked women, bikers, plastic cups full of beer, burlesque shows, those kind-of-awkward but kind of really sympathetic ‘best tattoo’ competitions with bad jokes and foreign visitors who barely spoke a word of English or Finnish, all packed into one industrial hall with the buzz of a hundred tattoo machines as a backdrop. This felt very different to the atmosphere I was used to at the shop where I had been doing my research for already a couple months at this point, but I am sure each shop is different as well. The wonderful (or sometimes crazy) thing about tattooing is that you as the consumer get all of the surrounding things as well. The whole experience is for every sense, quite literally, starting from the smell of the ink to the sensation your nerve endings decide to rattle you with as the machine goes through your skin.

The point I am trying to make is that tattoo culture, originating from and still in part being an underground culture, has a certain pull for some people and is more and more available today. But it has not really been trying to push itself into the mainstream or gain acceptance from anyone. This might originate from the rebellious nature associated with tattoos, or the fact that the practice has not been socially accepted at various times, so surely it has become defensive. No matter the reason, modern tattooing is going to a multitude of directions. Some more old-fashioned and some more liberal. What is certain is that tattoo consumers like my interviewees, come from all walks of life. And this is what is going to democratize tattooing if you will, and is bound to change attitudes even more in the near future. Tattoo culture will become what tattoo consumers make of it, a multitude of realities I am sure. Perhaps it is time for tattoo culture to start defining itself instead of letting outsiders define tattoo culture. I wish to contribute to that effort with this research, however slightly that may be.

For now though, let us look at what my interviewees have noticed and faced as they are still living in a world where not many if any of their close friends or family have tattoos and so are subjected to doubts and questions, and changing attitudes. As I mentioned before, often the first reactions my interviewees have faced are the ones by their parents. In almost all of my interviews this was discussed to a great extent, which is not surprising. “I’m (still) the only one with tattoos in our family, even in our extended family, no one has tattoos. My father’s side of the family is relatively small, but my mother’s side is large and they’re all emotional people. They’re conservative and... a bit old-fashioned.” My interviewee gets a bit wistful saying this, like he would be hoping that they would finally come around. This is the situation with a lot of people I talked to. They have had tattoos already for years, some tens of years, but still there is something unresolved hanging in the air.

“With my mother too, for a long time, when I got this (his full sleeve tattoo), I was always wearing a long sleeved shirt when visiting my parents. She knew that I have it, yes, but she just, she just didn’t want to look at me, like that ... This may sound more harsh than it really is, it’s never been that I’m, you know, ‘looked at in a bad way’ and my mother has maybe gotten used to it somehow even though she doesn’t approve ... When I visited them having gotten this (shows one of the newer tattoos he has), she asked ‘Did you get a new tattoo? Did you get it yesterday? I knew it!’ (laughs).”

This interviewee is definitely not alone, as I heard several similar stories, where the whole situation remains an enigma of sorts, not fully up for discussion. Why? No one usually really knows. At first when I started hearing these stories, I thought if this is worth noting at all, does not every child do things that their parents do not fully understand, want, or even need to understand? But then I saw how much attention similar situations gained in the interviews, and the emotions they brought forward. For the aforementioned interviewee, the contrast was fully clear to me when a bit further in the interview we were talking about his in-laws. “When I visited my parents-in-law for the first time, I did have a long sleeved shirt on ... but right away when I saw them for the second time, after fiving a first impression, I thought it was fine to wear a t-shirt ... they’re always interested if I’ve taken a new tattoo and they’re like ‘show

it, show it, show it'." While he was talking about this, I could notice that his spirit was lifted and he is understandably glad that his love for tattoos has been met with understanding and even excitement.

Again we have to remember that the scale of this issue is huge, for some it is something to laugh at, a funny contrast between generations, but for some it is more serious. For another interviewee, it has been an ongoing debate, one that has only gotten worse along the years. We were talking about her teenage years and how after her third tattoo her parents would not have given her permission to get more (usually in Finland you are required to have your parents written permission if you are under 18-years-old). Well she did end up getting a few more tattoos from unlicensed tattooists, which led to me asking if her parents thought that wanting tattoos would be a passing phase, since they even encouraged her to get the first ones. "Yes they did, well my mom won't talk to me about tattoos I get ... which is odd because she's gotten a few tattoos more herself. But still she gets upset and won't talk to me about them. Maybe a year ago she got one on the back of her hand and I asked her 'wait a minute, have you been thinking about how that's going to affect you getting a job, with a visible tattoo like that.'"

"It stopped (them talking about tattoos) after I got this one on my face ... she got really upset. At first I bought a fake tattoo that I tried on my face. I posted a photo of it on Facebook and she was like 'what the fuck have you done'. I told her that it was fake but that I would be getting a real one later. She told me that I wouldn't and I had to tell her that I'm an adult and I've been doing fine in life so far, earning a living for myself."

"I think after I got this one on my neck (she got a rose design on her neck the first time I met her at the studio) ... I asked her if she noticed anything and she told me 'yes, but I don't want to say anything.'"

"I don't think she will ever accept it, the more I get. I have told her that I'm going to have my body full ... She likes to look at tattoos and design them and so on, but for some reason she

fears for me... what people think and getting a job, that's what she's always worried about. How am I going to make it in life, looking like that.”

“People have their preconceptions but at the end of the day I've always gotten so positive feedback (from her employers), that I just don't believe...”

As you can see, we are at the core of why some tattooed people face critique from their loved ones. Channelling their own preconceptions of what the society at large might think, and the fact we talked in the previous part, that often other people see your tattoos as something that changes your personality although you feel them to be an integral part of you. Again, I do not want to jump into too many conclusions here, but rather document what these consumers do and face in their daily lives. It has been well documented how other peoples support for a consumption (or anti-consumption) habit (Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee, 2010; Dalli and Corciolani, 2008) can have a positive impact on wanting to keep consuming that same thing, but I find it fascinating how despite all the doubts and critique, these tattoo consumers are so confident of what they want. More tattoos. At least to a certain extent.

And yes, there are consumers that will take another path, listen to other people or perhaps just realize that they wanted one or two tattoos, or that they want theirs to be removed. The same interviewee's confidence also shows in her comment as we talk about young people today getting their first tattoos. “I'm going to be honest, I'm irritated by young girls waking up to this *fashion* thing, like it's gotten really out of hand recently. You know girls and guys saying that ‘I want my first on my neck’, and you get certain type of attention. I don't know if I'm lost in the woods here, but it irritates me a bit if someone comes up to me and says ‘oh you have that many tattoos, you're so mainstream’ ... I wouldn't get them off now even if I could but it's just a little annoying. Because I know there's a lot of people who will regret them soon enough. I just know about myself that I've decided a hundred years ago to look like this and everything, and now it's like a huge craze.”

She feels protective over both the tattoo culture and young adults, almost like a mother over her children. And it is clear why from what we have seen in this chapter. As I said tattooed

people do not necessarily want to actively promote their consumption activity as something positive, but they also do not want to see more of the type of behaviour that enforces stereotypes. Arsel and Thompson (2011, p.804) discuss how consumers have various interests to “contest and negate cultural meanings that would undermine the identity value of their acquired field-dependent capital instead of forgoing long-term – sometimes lifelong – identity investments in a field of consumption”, and tattoo consumption certainly can be defined as a lifelong investment.

As tattoos have become more popular, there are also people trying to take advantage of that, many of my interviewees feel. One part of changing general attitudes towards tattooing is speaking against these people, mostly tattooists with questionable ethics. Very rarely did I see critique of other tattoo consumers. Of course, an argument could be presented that adults should be free to choose whatever they want, as long as it is within the laws and regulations, but I did not really speak to anyone who would have felt this way about tattoos, as almost all would hold the tattooist partly responsible for the present and future consequences of his work.

Another interviewee tells me of a tattoo studio she found online: “I feel angry when there’s these... There was one tattoo studio that had samples of their work online, and they were just terrible, I felt it was awful to make money with that. Like really they were horrific, bad lines and proportions, and they made like portraits... I felt like saying to people ‘don’t go there!’”

It is safe to say that while people are free to choose, the responsibility for tattooing someone does not end when that customer walks out the door. This is why I have the utmost respect towards professionals like the tattoo artists in the studio I did my research in, as I very often saw them not only turning down requests they did not feel comfortable doing, but giving their honest advice to the consumer, even if that led to guiding them to another tattoo studio or the potential client leaving disappointed without a new tattoo. In this way, the tattoo artists and studios very much act as gatekeepers of tattoo culture and how it is perceived from outside. And if they are the gatekeepers, the consumers are representatives, whether they want to be or not.

If you look at the experience of being a person with tattoos and representing tattoo culture, one of my interviewees rises above the rest. The owner of tattoo studio has had his fair share of experiences, starting out as a consumer himself, and later on as a professional tattooist having his own studio but visiting many others both in Finland and all over the world quite regularly.

His parents were doubtful at first as well but came around quickly after they realized that he is committed to tattooing. “When I took my first, my mom and dad were like ‘that’s stupid’ but soon they told that ‘it’s quite beautiful’. Then when I could show that I can take care of my family and myself by doing tattoos, they were really supportive. Like my father, he used to be really against tattoos, and suddenly he started to get a few. His friends were terrified.”

“When his friends asked him ‘why would you do something like that?’, he told them that ‘well, you have to somehow show how proud of your boy’s choices you are.’”

He even ‘turned’ his father into an advocate for tattoos, thanks to the protective instincts that parents have over their children: “I remember working at my fathers company for a short while and a customer who came in said: ‘Hell, those tattoos, I just don’t understand’. My father said to him: ‘listen, my son makes them and earns more money than I do.’ Six months later the guy together with his wife came to get tattooed by me. (laughs) Crazy. Attitudes change, when they meet someone (with tattoos) and get to know them. Just somehow...”

“Surprisingly many have been at first like ‘I can’t understand...’ and then after some time, they’ve pondered a bit and they’re like ‘I’d maybe want something little, like my children’s names or something, they’ll stay the same at least’ (laughs).”

Perhaps the critics really have not had the courage ever to get one.

MEANING OF BEING A TATTOOED PERSON

When I started out my research, I was fixated on finding meanings. Meanings behind tattoos, I thought that linear narratives starting out from what consumers wanted their tattoos to represent to what they had tattooed and how the experience was like would be a perfect subject for this paper. Then I started to talk with people, luckily with a very open set of questions and subjects, and realized that it could be much more interesting to document all that surrounds the tattoos themselves and even more so what it is like to live as a tattooed person. I titled this chapter the ‘Meaning of being a tattooed person’ to contrast it to the popular question asked in TV shows and from a lot of tattooed people “does your tattoo mean anything?” or “what is the meaning behind your tattoo?” I want to present an alternative way of looking at consumption of tattoos. Not taking anything away from the importance of individual meanings of tattoos or why someone has a certain design, we shall look at a variety of different perspectives of how tattoo consumption affects how my interviewees see themselves and their surroundings.

As the previous chapter was about how complex and sometimes challenging consumption can be, now we move on to why it is worth it. In ways that people can predict when they start getting tattooed and in ways that they only find out after having those tattoos for years. Velliquette et al. (2006) compare tattoos to storytelling, and see them as telling “stories of the self”, while Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005, p.112) talk about “tattoo narrative” and how tattoos “function as points of reference or maps that enable life stories to be told”. From my perspective, previous research lacks depth, in finding out what exactly the metanarratives behind individual tattoos and being a tattooed person can be. I try to bring about this depth in this chapter.

In Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), the consumption cycle has been seen including acquisition, consumption, possession, and most recently the disposition process (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). A holistic view of trying to understand the “contextual, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption” has according to Arnould and Thompson (p. 871) for example created a whole new class of consumption in academic research, gift giving. In this

chapter, I also want to try and extend this framework to analysing consumption as a lived experience over time. By considering that someone possesses something, there is an existing notion that it could be disposed of, willingly or not. With tattoos, this is not the mindset at least, although you can remove or cover them. This difference in thinking is very important. There are very few decisions people make in the western society that they consider permanent for life. It could be argued with statistics that for example marriage is a much less permanent commitment than a tattoo. And that is a powerful thing. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) even say that “tattoos are ‘permanent’, yet life is not”. There are in fact people who have agreed to donate their tattooed skins to be presented at a museum after they have passed away [4] and many museums like the Science Museum in London showcase preserved tattooed human skins already. By looking at tattoo consumption as something that stays with you for your whole life, although acquiring new meanings along the way, I think we can get a new perspective to understanding the separation between subject and object in consumption.

As I wanted to get an understanding of the past, present and futures of my interviewees tattoo consumption, I asked from all of them what were the first distinctive moments they remembered that they acknowledged tattoos as something of interest to them. I could not really remember specific moments from my own youth, but the question seemed to bring up interesting answers so I kept asking it. Some of these memories were from quite a young age, and the Finnish sauna culture again raised its head as that is were you notice people’s tattoos but for most the thought of actually wanting a tattoo goes as far as their early teenage years. In these cases I am about to go through here, it is obvious that the tattoo represents something else than a personal meaning, something exciting, something cool.

“Spice Girls had tattoos that were really nice and... I remember that I saw a clip where they showed them off and they were like ‘yeah, I didn’t even cry when I got it, because women are tougher than men’. And I was *really* into Spice Girls during 5th grade and it was like, really cool. Like a great thing that they had tattoos, they’re tough women, they don’t care.”

Do you remember being attracted to tattoos as a teenager? “Yes, of course, because when you’ve read fantasy and sci-fi, for example in fantasy (literature) the elves and other creatures, they always have millions of amazing tribal tattoos and such...”

“The punks and hardcore guys had... It was a part of the lifestyle to get tattoos ... if someone had a half-sleeve, you thought ‘damn that’s a tough guy or a weirdo’. I mean, it’s pretty watered down nowadays.”

Associating tattoos with the Spice Girls, elves or punk rockers describes the variety of associations tattoos have had already for decades. Furthermore they are associated here with empowerment, mysticism and a subcultural identity, things that are still present with each of these interviewees tattoo consumption today, even though all of them waited for years before getting their first tattoos. This is why I want to focus on looking past the actual designs of the tattoos, as interesting and fantastic as they can be, to look past the symbolism of individual tattoos, something that has been documented fairly well both in academia, and media.

I have to note that during my research, talking about individual tattoos with people was crucial and should not be ignored as a researcher. That is what often led me to bigger topics and themes. This regularly included resisting the urge to go on and on about the designs themselves as they are truly fascinating at times, and as I personally like to learn about histories and novelties of certain traditional designs. Commonly I discussed designs and tattooing itself as I met people for the first time and as they were tattooed. Keeping the discussion light, so to say, I felt was important as tattooing can be hectic at times in a large studio with several tattooists and their clients, music playing in the background, all of the tattoo machines making noise and let us not forget, the pain of getting yourself tattooed. One of my interviewees for example was getting her neck tattooed, so I thought it best to save the discussion for the interview, even though she was willing to answer my basic questions during the breaks, something that amazed me looking back at the situation.

“If people ask ‘do your tattoos mean something?’ Then, no, my tattoos don’t have a meaning; it’s more how they’re arranged, where they are and when they have been taken. Maybe it’s

more about, that as an image it can be really beautiful, and I do like that my tattoos look pleasing at least to me, but when you start thinking about them as a whole, they come together like, ‘this I got then and this was then’. And *not* like, ‘oh I found the love of my life, I’ll get a heart and an anchor and...’ (laughs) ... If the symbolism is so clear and easy, that every grandmother and little child on the street can figure out what has happened to you... I could *never* get something like that.”

Some people even purposefully avoid popular symbolic designs, a topic we will briefly discuss in the chapter ‘Aesthetic’. For now, let us look further into how tattoos can hide meanings that are not clear to everyone else. The same interviewee tells me how he stores interesting designs he sees for example in books, and has a drawer full of potential tattoos, waiting for the right impulse to get them tattooed on himself.

“I’ve been thinking that because I have these images in my drawers for years, they collect certain symbolism and I think subconsciously it affects what I choose (to get tattooed) ... For example my father has Alzheimer’s ... and for the last 10 years, it’s been this huge *process*. When I started getting tattoos, I never really thought about it but when I look back now, I see a lot of the different stages of the disease and these certain type of memories about what he can’t remember anymore.”

He reiterates that this is something that did not even cross his mind at the time. For him, tattoos act as a living archive, the term he himself used of his attic full of curiosities and other material possessions. Surely as Belk (1988), saw material possessions as an extension of one’s self, you will allow me to use terminology in a similar fashion. Further on, he says: “Even though you never planned for it, you suddenly realize ‘hey, I have this sort of map of the whole... a timeline. I don’t know.” He also wants to emphasize the fact that all of his tattoos represent a multitude of feelings and attachments, positive, negative as well as neutral ones. They are also a result of a very private process of thought, something he says he would not share with strangers.

For him tattoos are filled with meanings, if you will, but they do not exist when he gets a tattoo. This is why he also loves ambiguous designs that leave room for interpretation. Anything that would define the tattoo or its general meaning too deeply, he tends to avoid. All of his tattoos are black and grey designs, he loves “unfinished” tattoos. “I’ve told my tattooist to not shade the tattoo, and after I tell him why, he understands. It’s sort of a process.” He is also generally against covering up your old tattoos and has helped friends to rather modify or “frame” them, to keep giving them new meanings instead of erasing them from your personal history.

Another great insight into the personal histories of my interviewees is offered by this interviewee who started out her tattoo consumption earlier than anyone else I spoke to. Her story is definitely unique and fascinating. “I was 14. When I was 14, my dad asked me if I wanted to get a tattoo. I think it was because he is afraid of needles and is this big baby, a biker guy after all ... if you think that it was 2004, when I was that age, tribal tattoos were the thing back then. So we connected to the Internet with this really slow connection and started looking around. Somehow the ‘biohazard’ symbol got selected and we also found this tribal sun design ... and then we combined them.”

“Yes, together with my dad we planned all this, we thought about the location and hey, lower abs, that was the place at the time.” She tells me how she only remembers that it hurt and that how proud of herself she was when she wore low-waist jeans and a short top to school right after getting the tattoo. I ask her if in fact showing the tattoo was what she immediately wanted to do. “Yes for sure! I could show that girl in my class that now I had one too...” There was another girl in her class who also had a tattoo, something she had been a bit jealous of. “I think I was 16 when I talked my parents into getting a new *tribal* tattoo ... that one I don’t have anymore (laughs). I covered it a few years back because it looked so hideous ... at the time it was great, because it was even more visible.”

For her, tattoos at the time were representative of coming of age, with the exact notion of showing others, just as I quoted the tattoo studio’s owner saying earlier. Since then those first tattoos have gained new meanings, they are funny reminders of that particular time of her life,

and especially the first tattoo is meaningful for her because it was something they did together with her father: “It’s ugly but I’ll leave it alone.” Even though her taste has changed quite significantly since, that first tattoo she wants to keep as it is. She tells me that some of the other earlier tattoos she has gotten, she has already covered or plans to cover with other designs. Still they are not something she wants to forget. “People always ask if I regret anything (about her tattoos) ... I think about who has made them and where I have been taking them and they include a lot of memories.” For her too, tattoos act as a sort of living archive, full of emotions and memories, often hard to describe to others.

This also applies to tattoos that hold that specific meaning, the kind that strangers in the street could be able to identify. Another interviewee has a tattoo dedicated to his wife, what he himself called “a cheesy love tattoo”. “And even though it’s really difficult to imagine, if we ever got divorced with my wife, if it happened, I’ve still been married to her. It’s like, so what if I have a tattoo, it’s about that moment in life.”

Forming that living archive, tattoos can act as reminders in good and bad, in all that we face in life. Perhaps not for all, but tattoos definitely have a therapeutic aspect to them. And what I often noticed is that despite changes in taste or life situations, people sort of learn to love their tattoos again and again. A poet could now say that they also learn to love themselves at the same time. The same interviewee tells me about his first tattoos, looking back at them now: “Those are the first two, yeah, and I wouldn’t mind if I hadn’t... well, hadn’t gotten them but that was then and there they are, and I’m not going to remove (or cover) them. I’ll keep the memories. Memories of the arguments and...”

With all of my interviewees, I discussed their professions and tattoo consumption as this seemed to bring up interesting views. I guess the stereotypical consideration has historically been when a young person is thinking of getting a visible tattoo and wondering if that would affect his or her chances in job interviews or further on in professional life. This struggle described by for example Velliquette et al. (2006, p. 45-47) is somewhat contradictory to what I found out.

First let me tell you about how one my interviewees was unsure about what career she should pursue at first, but is very happy with her current situation. She told me about the time between high school and university, when she was not sure what to study and went to school to become a management assistant, or a 'secretary', according to her. The school left her with an image of the corporate world as a narrow-minded place with no room for a personality. "It was really strict, starting from how to dress, 'this is how you should behave, talk, write. I guess in those companies, it's really (strict), you can't have any personalities really ... I was there for six months."

After that she was accepted into a university to study history, leading her to becoming a teacher. I asked her how she now feels about teaching: "It has been really nice, somehow I'm able to bring my personality into it too ... the students as well like a teacher that is genuine. When I think about my tattoos for example, a lot of people are like 'how can you have tattoos as a teacher?' I don't think those two things have anything to do with each other." It would seem after all that those things do have a connection like she said, with her being able to bring out, or at least not having to hide her personality at work.

She had her doubts as well when she was starting out, not only about tattoos but also on how much she would have to act in a certain way in order to be a teacher. During the interview she reflects on the situation: "The atmosphere at the school has been really tolerant. So maybe the struggle has been more inside my own head in a way..."

"Yeah (the image of) the profession and people in general, like what it is to live your life as an adult, what's it like to be a woman over 30 and things like that. I don't want to label myself as anything or to live like 'an adult'. Despite my profession, I don't think I have to be a model citizen who has to live a certain type of life. I want to hold on to that anarchy and maybe this has been a reminder for me." She was talking about a particular tattoo, but it is easy to see that being a tattooed person holds a similar meaning to her. This discourse resonates well with Thompson's (2004) research. He explains (p. 172) that "social institutions – such as the family, religion, professional work, education, and medicine – all produce discourses through which social hierarchies and status distinctions are constructed and legitimated." Now

according to Thompson, thus identity positions, such as how to be a parent, gain a sort of institutionalized standard, which is again redefined by marketing discourses or “capitalist lifestyle ideals”. In light of this, it could be argued that tattoo consumption can be used to reject or redefine these standards. Thompson (p. 173) importantly notes that it is more meaningful to understand what sort of power relations are at play and what types of identity positions people have, instead of trying to assess if they truly free people of a dominant ideology or “paradoxically reproduce” it.

There are also examples of tattoos distinctively helping out people with their careers, something I did not really expect to hear when I was planning my research. A couple of customers at the tattoo studio mentioned that they are working in retail and that their employers have specifically said to favour job candidates with “unique” styles, such as piercings, tattoos or colourful hairstyles. I am not sure how legal this sort of practice would be, but it was definitely interesting to hear. For long the fashion industry for example has been hiring tattooed people as models and certainly benefitted from that, but other more conservative industries could be taking a proactive approach as well, it seems. For one of my interviewees his unique appearance and charisma have been vital in letting him perform his profession, or should I say calling.

I mentioned him before, as the motorcycling religious man, and that indeed he is. After quitting his former profession due to health issues, he is now primarily concerned with helping others and “spreading the word”. He talks openly about his faith, referencing it almost all the time, but does not want to impose it on anyone. He says he wants to talk to people every day and that is why he is also wearing his vest or “patch” (he is a part of a group of Christian motorcyclists), so that people can approach him anywhere. And a lot of people do according to him. In an age of so-called connectedness it is refreshing to see someone actively trying to connect with strangers, offline.

Similar to his patch, the large visible tattoos have helped him approach people. With a serious but emphatic voice, he tells me: “I go where no one else will”. By this he means that he frequently goes to motorcycle clubs, especially the so-called “one percenter clubs”, strict in

their policies of who to let into their clubhouses, to talk about everything from faith to motorcycles. It is clear to him that this is what he should be doing and that it is valuable work. Much like a researcher, he has gained access and therefore trust of these people because of his personality and quite frankly, appearance. To be clear, this has not been the reason for him getting tattoos, but as the title of this chapter suggests, this is one important meaning for him as a tattooed person, to be able to connect with other people.

How about when your profession is the exact same thing you love as a consumer? For the shop owner, and a lot of other tattooists as well, there are a lot of interesting interactions that come from the fact that you almost certainly have to devote your life to tattooing in order to make a career out of it. “At some point I started to focus just on tattooing and then I had *nothing* else in my life. Relationships and everything... I just focused on that. It became a... passion. And that’s what I sort of demand, that if you’re an apprentice and want to become a tattooist, you have to have that desire, for the first years you can’t have anything else in your life.”

The sheer fact that as a tattooist starting out, you have to first find a consumer willing to let you tattoo him or her, creates a fascinating dynamic that blurs the line between consumption and production. Many tattooists do actually start out by doing a lot of tattoos for themselves, as they want to try out new techniques or styles. These types of tattoos can hold various meanings, from dedication to your profession to simply fun memories. As tattoos can act as rites of passage, tattooing you own skin surely is a type of rite for tattooists.

The all-encompassing role of tattooing in one’s life can be seen throughout the shop owner’s interview. He has even met his current partner at the shop and has tattooed her several times. “I’ve tattooed her quite a few times now but I generally let other people do tattoos for her, it’s somehow... difficult when you’re going to see the tattoo every day.” At the time of the interview, he was having difficulties with working due to health issues and tattoos acted as a constant reminder of a dire situation. He tells me how one official admired his tattoos at the unemployment office as other officials and doctors have suggested that he should reconsider his career of 20 plus years, and how he hates the fact that he is not able to tattoo every day. “I

have been thinking and thinking what (else) I could do and nothing comes to mind. Because this has always been what I have wanted to do until I die.”

CONSTRUCTION OF A DISTINCTIVE STYLE

Tattoo consumption fascinatingly operates on the outskirts of marketing logic. It could be defined as more of a social movement than a form of consumption, at least according to how Murray (2002) defines contemporary social movements: “Whereas the “old” social movements developed out of structural in-equalities, new social movements have developed around fashion, style, identity, and what Maffesoli (1996, p.9) calls “neotribalism” or “emotional communities.” Thus, fashion results from a combination of subject positions, with meaning resulting the play of differences in the context of identity performance.”

As of yet tattooing has not faced the ‘appropriated, packaged, and sold’ cycle of doom by postmodern marketing described by for example Murray. Throughout my research I have been wondering if this can ever happen to tattooing. Yes, it can become trendy or fashionable. Some elements of tattooing, certain designs or styles for example, can become more popular than others and acquire negative connotations. Still, you cannot (at least with current technology) commercialize or mass-produce tattoos. As a craft, tattoos require a craftsman and significant amounts of time, even though the process is already much faster than it used to be with stencils (scanned images) now being done with machines rather than drawn by hand.

Murray argues that as consumers adopt different styles and lifestyles, such as the voluntary simplicity lifestyle that he uses as an example, marketing responds to this by seeking “authentic” meanings and codes behind those styles to ultimately commercialize them. This again leads to the consumer moving on. “This makes the construction of a distinctive style a continuous struggle involving a tug-of-war between life worlds and social systems.” (p. 439) He then goes on to raise an important point about how interpretive marketing research has had

a huge emphasis on consumer agency, and that to have a full picture, consumer studies should “embrace the dialectical interplay between agency and structure.”

What I noticed through the discourse analysis of my interviews is a void of consumerism and all that it has been critiqued for. Murray (p.439) summarizes what Firat and Venkatesh (1995) brought up about escaping the market by engaging in practices that people do not see commercial forces having an impact on. I would argue that on an individual level, tattoo consumers see themselves as the creators of their own distinctive styles and in a way manage to escape what has since Murray’s research become a much more furiously meaning appropriating market logic. Tattoo consumption as you will see in this chapter, is often seen as self-expression and as a more or less systematic way of establishing a distinctive style or arguably, without this paper purposefully not going too deep into identity construction and psychology, self. Thompson (2004, p. 170) uses the term “self-mythology” of how people take ownership of marketplace mythologies, attributes and meanings attached to products and services derived from general cultural myths. I see similar self-mythologies being built by tattoo consumers, using the cultural knowledge that they themselves and their tattooists have, as well as life experiences, and transforming them into a narrative form using tattoos. The tattooists can be seen here as suppliers of marketplace mythologies, similarly to companies, even though the consumer sometimes views them as artists more so than service providers.

Postmodern consumption theory also highlights how difficult it usually is for people to have a coherent sense of self. This is seen throughout consumer and social research and summarized well by Zukin and Maguire (2004, as cited by Dittmar 2008, p. 12): “Identity shifts from a fixed set of characteristics determined by birth and ascription to a reflexive, ongoing, individual project shaped by appearance and performance. This freedom, however, comes at the cost of security; without fixed rules, the individual is constantly at risk of getting it wrong, and anxiety attends each choice.” I found that tattoo consumption can offer people a way to relieve that anxiety and give them confidence in their distinctive identities and styles. Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) say tattoos are used by people “to control their lives when faced with the chaos of late modern society.”

And while Velliquette et al. (2006) suggest consumers can achieve “redemption” through tattoo consumption, which already by using the theological term assumes that tattoo consumption almost miraculously helps consumers to atone for something, my research suggests that consumers deliberately use consumption as a tool to help express their personalities and construct distinctive styles that relate to separate areas of their lives and that there does not have to be anything specific to atone for.

“Even though I like clothes, my own style... when I left home in the morning I noticed that I had jeans and a t-shirt. And actually at that point, I’ve started getting tattoos. Maybe I noticed that I have to come up with something... Because at that point I’ve done many other things too, like bought an apartment and the sort of things you ‘should do’ in life.”

Quite literally escapism in this case, this self-analysis by one of my interviewees shows how tattoos can even be seen as a replacement for previous consumption habits. I noticed that for all of my interviewees tattoos offer a way to express themselves, something many of them used to do through consuming something else. With their permanent nature, tattoos are a more stable alternative, compared to for example teenage styles of clothing and appearance. Another interviewee tells how her style has transformed throughout the years.

“As a teenager I had this stage of rebellion, well, I had piercings and was really into Korn, all, oh this nu-metal, Limp Bizkit and Korn and whatnot ... I’ve always been unusual, or not unusual but not really going with the crowd, I’ve never feared being different or wearing clothes that were my style ... yeah, yeah I had (takes a deep breath), I had dreadlocks (laughs), blond ones for a long time, then I dyed them black because Jonathan Davis (the lead singer of Korn) had (black ones).”

“I’ve often told my husband that that (nu-metal inspired style) would maybe still feel most like ‘me’, but (laughs loudly) maybe I won’t do that, but anyway...” She continues to tell me how she is definitely not ashamed of her teenage years and style, and does not really know how or why she grew out of that style gradually. Later on in our discussion she tells me how she likes the contrast of her tattoos with for example a nice dress that she would wear. “I think it’s nice

when you take your jacket off and your tattoos are showing, and it's like 'ah, ok'. I think it's fun. To somehow disturb the peace. Maybe I have that sort of anarchy in me at times, wanting to shake things up a bit (laughs cheerfully). To force people to think about something else than the masses."

More or less purposefully my interviewees construct their unique styles. Like I explained in the final part of the first chapter 'Gaining Confidence', these consumers have built up the confidence to develop their styles, not necessarily in a way that they would not care about anything and do whatever they want, but in a way that reinforces the view that tattoo consumption allows them to express themselves. Naturally some people do not find this confidence from tattoo consumption and thus do not continue to get tattooed and for some it has not been about expressing themselves in the first place. However, here we are focusing on the people that use tattoo consumption as a systematic tool for constructing or I would say often maintaining their distinctive styles, as it seems that for some people tattoos have replaced or are complimentary to other means of self-expression.

And by complimentary, I mean in ways that help people express certain things about themselves that are already part of their lives. The same interviewee ends up talking about this as we get into a discussion about her husband and her. "We both sort of hid the fact that we're nerds and then it somehow got revealed that we're both super nerdy. And we also have a lot of friends for whom gaming is a really big part of yourself and the gaming scene is so much more, something that is fun to talk about ... Then for anyone (in general) and everyone who's into that, these (her gaming-related tattoos) are maybe a sort of indication, something you might now otherwise realize about me, that if someone else sees it, they might think 'why does she have that, is there something?' Then it's a sign that they might be able to identify."

She also tells me how her tattoos that relate to a specific Japanese manga and anime series, do not only represent that series but rather the manga and anime scene as a whole for her and like she explained, to people that might see her tattoos. With her for example it is hard to tell how purposeful this process has been, as she herself is sort of wondering about her tattoos during the interview 'oh yeah, there is actually quite a few of them' and that she might jump into a

new theme soon. But definitely there is a narrative of wanting to bring forward this side of her life and it would be almost too easy to make a connection between her getting all of these gaming, manga and anime related tattoos during the last few years and her saying that once she became a mother there has been less and less time for her previous hobbies, such as the ones mentioned.

Like any form of consumption, tattoo consumption usually starts out with experimentation. You have to try something out before you can be sure if you like it or not. This narrative by one of my interviewees was a common one: “Before I had any tattoos, we were driving around and talked about me wanting my first one, when a fully tattooed guy drove past us with his arm out the window (starts to smile) and my mother told me that ‘soon you’ll be looking like that’ and I told her ‘I’m never going to get that many’ (imitating a confident younger version of himself and laughing). Yeah, you didn’t really realize it then.” I guess mothers can be right about a lot of things when it comes to their children. Now, years later, what started out as experimentation, a cool thing to do or something to show to his friends, he sees tattoo consumption as something he does more systematically and although he likes different types of tattoos nowadays than back as a teenager, his affection for tattoos has only grown stronger.

I feel compelled at this point to give an example of the depth of experience that the process of tattooing itself can have, as these experiences and moments as much as living with tattoos, which we have discussed more, give people sense of accomplishment, joy and fulfilment. After a few smaller tattoos, the same interviewee decided on making a big step and getting a full sleeve design all over his other arm. At this point he also abandoned his former philosophy of getting only black and grey tattoos so the new more colourful design certainly must have been exciting in itself.

How did you feel after finishing your arm? “I felt *fantastic*, just fantastic. From when we first started I always waited it to be complete and I felt like I had *came home*. Because somehow it’s really hard for me to imagine myself without tattoos, really hard. It was just, really cool. I remember looking at myself in the mirror before we started, and the outlines had been drawn with the blue marker and being like ‘c’mon!’ Yeah... Yeah it was exciting.”

He currently has difficulties finding the time to actually come to the studio because of his work and tells me “I’d just want to come more often now”. I find it intriguing how excited he is about his recent tattoos and tattoos he wants to get. I ask him how many tattoos he sees himself taking in the future and what type of designs. Right away he starts talking about different styles, when usually people would start with a consideration of ‘how far’ they are willing to go. The answer to the latter comes later: “With those I’m going to fill myself as much as I possibly *dare*.” Even then, he continues to tell about the process, what parts of his body he is going to get tattooed next, in which style et cetera. Only after I steer the conversation a little, he tells me how far he is not willing to go. “Well not the *whole body*, but something like that anyway ... well face. There isn’t going to be one on my face.”

Another interviewee describes getting tattoos and planning them out, planning your individual style, as a process: “I see this as a process and as something you plan out, it’s not like ‘oops, my hair is now longer’, but you intentionally start building something. It’s probably mild *body modification* what I appreciate. Facelifts and everything, everyone always bemoans what women have done to themselves, and I say ‘wow!’ (laughs), I think the commitment they have is pretty great.”

For those that do see tattooing as a process, they also usually see some sort of end result, however vague it might be. Still, tattoos with their corporeal nature, like body modifications, can have a life of their own and it is impossible to predict what exactly they will be after years pass. This is why many tattoo lovers predict to be getting tattooed for the rest of their lives. Certainly that kind of commitment to about anything is admirable. A British tattoo artist who makes mostly black large-scale designs that require a big commitment from his customers weighed in on the subject on his Instagram account, a popular media with contemporary tattoo artists:

“‘What does it mean?’ It’s a question I’m often confronted with when people see my work for the first time. It’s how we try and understand the world we live in, we question the things that challenge us. The simple answer is there isn’t a simple one size fits all answer. Each tattoo I

create represents something different to the person who wears it and that is their story to share. However one thing that is represented by all the work I do is 'Perseverance'. You need to only have felt the bite of a needle once to know that receiving a tattoo is painful so imagine getting large areas blacked with every fibre of you wanting to quit yet still finding a way to carry on. If you see my work and don't like the way it looks, no problem. But you've gotta (sic) respect what it represents." [5]

In terms of what Murray (2002) was saying about the construction of a distinctive style becoming a continuous struggle in the contemporary environment, I do sense tattoo consumption having a stabilizing effect on the people I talked to. Especially once they have reached the point when they become confident enough to not consider other people's opinions too much, tattoo consumption does seem to offer an uncontested way of self-expression and thus creating a distinctive self-image. Not a static one though, as many other things define these consumers as well, tattoo consumption is "just" one of them no matter how much of your life revolves around tattooing.

Why is it then that tattoo consumption could offer a way for these consumers to creatively pursue their identity projects at a time when seemingly consumers are trying to escape the suppressive market totally (Kozinets, 2002), resist cultural appropriation of meanings by advertising (Rumbo, 2002) or even use techniques such as whistle-blowing to challenge consumerism from inside vilified corporations (Gabriel, 2008)? Perhaps because the tattoo market lacks some of the more oppressive forces of consumer culture, such as aggressively marketed body ideals.

Dittmar (2008) extensively covers the subject of consumer culture and how it can affect people negatively. She theorizes that if people strive for "unhealthy and unrealistic material 'good life' and 'body perfect' ideals", such as the ones present in fashion advertisement, consumer culture becomes a "cage within", as consumers try to seek answers to these negative feelings through, you guessed it, consuming more. Dittmar goes through a vast amount of examples of how this can affect people's physical and mental well-being in her book and even says that "helping future generations to escape as much as is possible from the 'cage within' is

a collective responsibility for us all.” (p. 222) The tattoo industry though, amazingly despite its clear fetish for the body, I would say promotes a strong message of accepting and embracing one’s body as it is. Because tattoo consumers strive for something they can realistically have, a tattooed body, those negative feelings never gain a grip. Instead of a negative cycle, all of my interviewees seem to be in a positive cycle with their tattoo consumption. This is not to say that tattoo consumption could not produce negative feelings, but even the interviewees who felt negatively about some of their older tattoos, have learned to move on and accept them as part of their selves. This part of tattoo consumption has largely been disregarded in previous research, a view supported by for example Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005), who say that only recently the way towards “a positive diagnosis of tattooing” (p. 112) has opened in specifically sociology, and the negative aspects are very much the focal point in for example psychological studies such as Lemma (2010).

Baudrillard (1970) talks about how the body is “invested in”, a view supported by Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer (2002, p. 807) who see consumers as “managers” of their own bodies. Baudrillard sees that the beauty ideals shown in magazines and advertisements can never be achieved, but he importantly notes that these investments are trying to transform the body into a more desirable version “for the outside world.” I see that tattoo consumers also make similar, using financial terms, long-term investments, but to transform their bodies for themselves.

As we saw in the first chapter, the social reactions often are mixed at best, so clearly the purpose is not to please the mainstream beauty ideal. Tattoos can of course be used to that purpose as well, like in the Maori culture currently and in the past (Thomas, Cole, and Douglas, 2005). Again though, there the lack of a capitalist agenda is present. The topic of critically assessing marketing different ideals, such as the beauty ideal, or according to Baudrillard “this latent terrorism, directed in Elle more particularly at women” is something I wish to bring forward with my research.

I would not want to suggest what Baudrillard would say about tattoo consumers. But I think that his idea of how the body has transformed from something that was used as “labour

power” to a sort of investment is fascinating. He argues that the liberatory narratives used to sell products actually have a more alienating agenda, and also suggests that society worships the body as it used to worship the soul, using the concept “cult of the body” (p. 136), that you can make your body a success by investing in it, in the same way that you can invest in your career and make yourself successful. Deviating from this social construction would cause society to view you critically. Now, tattoo consumption could be seen as either deviating from the mainstream beauty ideal, for example in the case of heavily tattooed women described by Patterson and Schroeder (2010), or in fact as an investment to your body and thus as a new form of what Baudrillard calls the “myth of liberation”. We have seen arguments for both sides in this paper. This could only be answered if we could objectively read consumers’ minds. If consumers think that people will have negative reactions to their tattoos, they are according to Baudrillard’s theory, making a purposefully negative investment, not caring about society’s view, but if they think that other people will see it positively, they are making a positive one. Arguing that tattoos are purely for yourself and social constructions play no role, does not seem sensible in the light of consumer culture or social theories.

I argue that tattoos can be used for both, either to free yourself of cultural and social norms, or to embrace them. Using Thompson’s (2004) terminology, people can write their own “self-mythology”. Thompson explains further in his research that people use marketplace mythologies to “contest a socially an institutionally dominant discourse of power” (p. 171), in his case “natural health approaches to redefine the meanings of their illnesses (and thereby contest medical authority)”. In tattoo consumption, I would say that “contesting” would rather be redefining. One good example would be a lovely woman I talked to during the ethnographic phase of my research who also had been battling an illness, cancer more specifically, and had to have a break from tattooing because of her treatments. At the time, she had finished her treatments and was allowed to continue getting tattooed, something that clearly helped her process all that she had gone through. She actually took three separate tattoos at the same time, a commitment that showed how much they meant to her after a troubling time. That was her way of celebrating, something she planned to continue home with her children. Powerfully in that case, but also for many others, tattoo consumption helps people to build their “self-mythology”, reinforcing and sometimes celebrating their lived

experiences and accomplishments. What Thompson describes as “a humanistic need to imbue deeper meaning and significance” is present, but not necessarily in a countercultural context.

AESTHETIC

In this final chapter I want to talk about an essential element of tattoo consumption, something that in some shape or form came up in discussions with everyone I talked to during my research. A specific element of not just tattoos but anything visual, something that each of us have a unique view of. I am talking about aesthetics, the sensorial and emotional values that we consciously or unconsciously use to judge pretty much anything we come across. Sometimes it is hard to explain why we like how certain things look, why they are aesthetically pleasing to us. Our aesthetic, or taste, keeps changing as well and is a mixture of influences we have previously been exposed to. In tattoo consumption, aesthetics are constantly a consideration and this is why I think the narratives are so vivid and worthy of being presented here. You might not see right away what pencil cases, mounted animals, boleros or cymbals have to do with tattoos but I think they have everything to do with them.

“I think about how something looks, aesthetics are really important for me, and not necessarily to have a certain message. Of course I do have tattoos that mean a lot to me, just because of their message ... but I’m not this ‘TV tattoo show’ client who tells a story around the tattoo, for me it’s important that it looks good and so on...”

Similar narratives kept coming up when talking to people. I think it would be foolish and naïve to try to deny that tattoos are superficial to a point, even to the toughest of people. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) explain the concept of ‘hedonic consumption’, a theoretical perspective derived from for example philosophy of aesthetics and a multitude of behavioural sciences, as a mixture of “consumers’ multisensory images, fantasies and emotional arousal in using products.” In the context of tattoo consumption, I would say that people want to have a positive hedonic reaction, or “consumer emotive response” as Hirschman and Holbrook put it,

to what they are about to get tattooed. This is an important expansion of postmodern marketing theory to the modern consumption theories that had the consumer assessing product attributes and functionalities instead of what they look and feel like. And what I learned to like about tattooed people I talked to, is this nonchalant attitude and straightforwardness that they approach the subject with. “I don’t know, I just like them” “They’re just cool to me” “I like the way it looks”, were probably the most common answers I got when I would ask people why they chose a certain design. No one was ashamed to say that they want to look good, but rather embraced it and there was absolutely no need to try to impress me as the researcher somehow with an elaborate answer.

Tattoos being indefinitely customizable, I think help bring out the creativity in people and allow them to use their aesthetics in a very unique way in terms of consumption. I often was left wondering and talked with people as well, if tattoos should be considered as art. Perhaps the question is not too relevant but undoubtedly the process of creation that both the consumer and tattooist go through is similar to that of a painter or a musician. Even if someone walks into a tattoo studio and lets the tattooist do whatever they want, most likely a lot of thought has gone into selecting that tattooist. Most often though, the consumer has their own set of ideas and preferences, which (s)he then tries to communicate to the tattooist, who is acting as a part customer servant, part artist. I am going to be discussing the consumer side of things here though and from their view, if you recall Jake Gyllenhaal’s quote about his character Donnie Darko in the beginning of this paper, it is much like a journey up to the point of being in the tattoo studio and explaining themselves to their tattooist. A mixture of all the emotions, likings and styles they have gone through in their life, which they then reflect on, all the time revising their aesthetic philosophies. Some of them can translate more directly to tattoos and some of them more indirectly. In traditional art terms, you could say that some loved Picasso already as teenagers and some learned to love it later in life. Some will probably even begin to hate it at one point and get a Cézanne cover-up.

These journeys of finding your distinctive style, what we talked about in the last chapter, and the aesthetic to go with it, may start when you are born but often first references people themselves give are from their teenage years. That is when a lot of us start searching for our

individual styles and set out to differentiate ourselves from others, at least in the western consumer culture context. Like we saw earlier, some can even get something as permanent as tattoos, but for most, it is a time of experimentation and shifting styles, constantly trying out new things or at least admiring them. It can be hard to backtrack someone's teenage style from what their style is today but their current choices might be easier to understand having that historical knowledge. Thus, even tattoo consumption much later in life is certainly representative of those lived experiences. Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005, p. 121) go as far as saying that tattooed "images, colours and symbols reflect transitions and provide the structure for life history. They function as reminders for their bearers' history and they serve as lived memories remaining on the surface of the body." This would suggest that seemingly aesthetic choices could be results of personal history.

To give you an example of what those journeys can be, let me introduce you to one of my interviewees. Now a man in his thirties, with a peculiar and recognized sense of style, a visual artist and designer in his own right, he gave me detailed descriptions of his sense of style and aesthetics starting from his teenage years. During the interview I must say I was glad that he was so talkative, as I spent much of my time trying to visualize the things he was telling me about.

He told me that he used to live in a small town in rural Finland, and that he was really into fashion already as a teenager. Naturally of course, school was the only place where you really spent your time, so that was what you dressed up for.

"I think back and wonder a bit myself, cause I had (*sighs loudly*), what's it called, yeah, Swear shoes, these outrageous Spice Girls –platforms in a variety of colours. And as it was one iconic style, you combined them with... If you look at Deee Lite or the bands of that time, they drew inspiration from the 1970's and 1960's, and then you went to the flea market to get stuff and combined it with Adidas and Nike and whatever. And sports. The sizes were starting from XXL, and from the flea market you bought like children's t-shirts with like an image of a dinosaur. And under that you had a flannel shirt and tight, extremely wide corduroy bell-bottoms, the swear shoes, and on top of that some mint green faux fur mini-bolero. *Easily.*"

As much as I would have loved to see what type of tattoos he would have taken at that time, he waited until much later before getting one, even though he clearly remembers being attracted to tattoos already at that age. After those teenage years of extravagance, and having worked with visual design he has developed a taste for what he himself calls *curiosities*. Judging by the enthusiasm alone, I could argue that looking for them and creating them are his favourite past time.

“I work in interior design and I’d have all these great discounts for all the brands, but they don’t interest me. I’m not the least bit interested in new production, I’m not interested to go shopping and buying something new, I’m the one who goes around, around antiquarians and flea markets, trying to find these somehow more interesting things.”

These are the first references that one can clearly see in his tattoos as well. Most of his tattoo designs are variations of designs dating back to the Middle Ages or even further into classical mythology. Also the process of looking for them is very similar to finding his curiosities, going through tens and hundreds of different designs, before choosing one. And in fact one of his favourite books from which he got a design tattooed from when I first met him, is from one of those flea markets he so frequently searches items from.

“For example these mounted animals, when you’ve grown up with mounted moose, rabbits, and willow grouses, these basic game... They’ve left this curiosity... I’m interested in the old, tens or hundreds of years old, often badly mounted animals. Their eyes might not be in the right place, and it’s sort of that time’s perception of the animal and it’s such beautiful handicraft. It’s just really magnificent, like, mysticism.”

“Well, my dream is to have a human skull or something. You have to have these, well, curiosities. Icebreakers ... and they’re like, you know, a bit living. It’s not like I put the glass showcase on them and it’s never opened.”

These narratives can be seen throughout his tattoos, they are filled with a sense of mysticism and are also sometimes seemingly incomplete, perhaps without shading, something that is usually seen as an essential part of a complete tattoo. Eventually he reveals that he has a motto, something that applies to his aesthetic in general as well as tattoos.

“I basically have this motto with my best friend, that ‘beauty isn’t always pretty’ which translates to my tattoos as well and how I pick them. I don’t pick something because it’s maybe beautiful to other people. It can be a rough subject or a rough thing, but if there’s something beautiful in the way it’s presented... or even the ugliness can actually make it beautiful.”

It is often talked about what sort of aesthetics a company, a brand or a designer uses to create something new. Even as the postmodern marketing paradigm sees the consumer using products and brands as building blocks (Holt, 2002) to mix his or her own end result, it is seen that brands and companies are the ultimate forces that create these building blocks according to their visions. With the rise of movements like the maker culture, where the creative side is moving more towards individual consumers, I think it will be even more important for marketers to start understanding what types of design philosophies their customers have and how to help them become even more creative. Tattoo consumption wonderfully shows how people are able to turn their distinctive styles and sense of aesthetic into, for the lack of a better word, tattoos.

Many times during that aforementioned interview, it was hard for me to distinguish whether he was talking about his tattoos or his aesthetics in general. That is when I also knew that this is a topic worth exploring further. The same thing happened with another interviewee who also talked about his favourite hobby, playing the drums and jazz music specifically.

“Old, yeah old ones ... very traditional ... 1950’s and 1960’s style”

“I always *admired* drummers that held their drumsticks with a traditional grip, this old marching band drummer’s grip with their left hand and so on (laughs). It was somehow

admirable ... the style, and for me when a jazz drummer has a small set, small bass drums and small tom-toms that have been hung really high and then again all of the cymbals are huge. Somehow for me it's really aesthetically pleasing (laughs). Those kinds of things around the music itself affected me really a lot."

The connection here to his tattoo consumption is not only the obvious one, which would be that he has recently been getting traditional American –style tattoos, designs that date back to the same time period than the jazz he likes. For me the big thing here was hearing how important this was to him and just by going through his description of those drummers again and again, I started to get an admiration for the drummers myself, having never played the drums. What I understood from that interview and other interviews is how important aesthetics are to people. In tattoos they are ever-present, and easy to hear in consumer's narratives, but especially in fields of product design where functionality is sometimes considered as a conflicting issue, I feel it would be important to take notice how much we as humans appreciate aesthetics. Not to say that functionality would not be an issue in tattooing, as this is actually what separates experienced tattooists from amateurs, as the former are experts of analysing how the body is shaped and adjusting the tattoos accordingly. I was amazed to find out that for most of us our nipples are vertically very unevenly situated.

The aesthetics of tattoo consumption also have much to do with how the tattooed body looks. This is an important notion for many consumers that are heavily tattooed. A lot of people told me that they see the 'empty' parts of their body when they look into the mirror rather than individual tattoos. "I look at my back from the mirror and I notice like 'oh damn, it's empty' and that's like 'oh my god.'"

"I don't know if it comes from the fact that I think if your whole body is tattooed, it's really beautiful, that for me it's more about aesthetics than each (tattoo) having symbolism or so. In that way I'm a bit *careless*."

It used to be difficult to even see tattoos, much less bodies fully covered in them. In recent decades with tattoo magazines and in recent years with the Internet and social media, tattooed

bodies have become more exposed than ever. An anonymous author writes about the adoption of the tattoo aesthetic in the consumption critical magazine *Adbusters* (2016): “Fashion labels, celebrities and street-style stars are helping usher once-transgressive body modifications like allover tattoos and unusual piercings into upscale quarters.” And undoubtedly with this aesthetic being more available, more people are drawn to it. Still, close to fully tattooed bodies remain exceptions. One of the tattooists at the studio has a sticker on their drawer where he keeps his machines, that says: “Body suit – many want, few get”.

Tattoo aesthetics can be seen in consumer items as well. With one of my interviewees I got into a discussion about certain designs and how those traditional tattoo designs have been adopted to commercial use: “Ed Hardy, yes. They were somehow so in fashion, the imagery. Birds and hearts and skulls, they were in H&M clothing, and pencil cases and who knows what, it suddenly exploded. And diamonds! They were everywhere.” Certain traditional tattoo imagery such as diamonds and skulls have, with or without licensing, been showing up in peculiar items, such as pencil cases or kids clothing. The most famous example of a licensed brand is without a doubt the brand that carries the name of one of the big personas in western tattooing, Don Ed Hardy. Don Ed Hardy was a student of Sailor Jerry Collins (1911 – 1973), whose iconic American traditional tattoo imagery lives on in almost every tattoo studio that respects the American traditional style. His designs prominently also feature on different consumer goods such as shoes and there is for example a spicy rum named after him, something that Don Ed Hardy helped to create. Ed Hardy’s own label that he licensed to several different companies quite famously gained quick success and according to the *New York Post* [6] peaked at a mind-blowing \$700 million gross revenue in 2009, only to close most of its stores on 2010.

Somehow though, this does not seem to affect the tattoo industry too much at least from my research’s perspective. Yes, the interviewee I mentioned before told me that she became hesitant to get a diamond design tattooed after they gained so much popularity in popular culture, but that was one of the only times I even heard the subject discussed. I can not quite put my finger on it, but it seems like the moment a tattoo design is applied to a context that does not involve the human body, it is no longer affecting its culture of origin.

Bengtsson, Ostberg, and Kjeldgaard (2005) studied the use of brand symbols in tattooing, and they say that this practice or the idea of it is rejected or even despised by other tattoo consumers as well as people without tattoos. Somehow, it is seen as an invasion, the skin seems to act as a sort of final frontier between an authentic self and market forces. The fact that there are people with brand symbol tattoos, shows though that this is also something people embrace, be it for aesthetic or other reasons. Similarly though, I noticed that what other people see as highly symbolical, from religious to nationalistic to historical imagery, some only consider according to the designs aesthetic.

I was talking with a tattooist who works at the shop, who was at the time studying esoteric symbolism on his free time at a local university, and he explained that even the most trusting consumers who want certain symbolic, often traditional, designs, most often demand seemingly stylistic changes to those designs, be it shapes or colours or arrangement, according to their aesthetic. Despite the fact that he would explain to them that the symbolic of the design would change drastically when modified. This is a much different notion than what is explained by Hambly (1925), as tattoos and tribal markings in the past seemed to be irrelevant for their aesthetic and taken because of their believed qualities and powers. Often the tattooee would have no say in the design, something which still does happen with for example the most conservative forms of traditional Japanese tattooing but more rarely as tattooing has become a service-oriented industry.

DISCUSSION

I wanted to present an insider view into these consumer's lives and how they view the world as tattooed people. A zeitgeist-type of description, one that considers social and cultural constructions as well as consumer research theories inseparable. I want to see consumer research as a thought-provoking, energizing, critical, and people-oriented science, that uses its nature of not having to deal with objective truths to its advantage, instead of trying to become a 'hard science' to gain credibility in general academia. This is partly why I have given so

much weight to consumers' own narratives in this paper. We as marketers can and will put on all kinds of spectacles (Gabriel, 2008) but what truly matters is what consumers, people, feel and experience in their own and collective minds.

By looking at consumption as a journey, an extension to Holt's (1995) categories of consumption, marketers would in my opinion be able to create more long-lasting relationships with their customers. Tattoo consumption has unique characteristics, but I think the wider applications of my research lay in especially the methodology and descriptions of those consumer journeys. Whereas many designers for example use imaginary personas in product development, those tend to focus on what the imaginary people are like before using that said product. Customer profiles also usually narrowly focus on the immediate consequences of purchasing something. By extending these profiles to the journey framework, unexpected ways that objects of consumption affect peoples' lives can appear.

Especially in high involvement products and services, where there is an opportunity to engage the consumer in a long term relationship with a company or an organization, it would be crucial to understand each of the topics I went through in this paper. For example what types of critique consumers might face, what that product or service is able to provide to people during different stages of their lives, or if they can use it to create a distinctive style. And by interviewing their customers thoroughly about their experiences in life, I am sure a lot of companies would be able to create their own criteria, or themes, with which to evaluate if they are able to create meaningful relationships with their customers.

More philosophically, I see that the traditional subject-object view is to be revised while studying contemporary consumption. Rather than asking 'What do consumers use object X for?' I would suggest asking 'what do consumers do together with object X?' For example, mobile phones used to be a tool for people to communicate, they were used *for* something. A more recent view looks at them as extensions of people, almost as inseparable as tattoos. A Facebook-sponsored study by IDC in 2013 [7] reports that 79% of people aged 18-44 have their smartphones active and near them 22 hours a day. Surely this changes how we experience the world, together with our smartphones as they too act proactively, demanding

attention, gaining critique, and signifying different meanings to different people. In terms of my research, I would suggest that it is more meaningful to investigate and understand what people do with their smartphones instead of say for example trying to figure out what it means that someone is an iPhone user and someone else an Android user. Instead of saying that by choosing a certain brand, someone tries to portray a certain identity, we could focus on how people can express themselves as users of those devices.

Even with consumption objects that have a limited lifetime, say a car for example, I feel the consumption as a journey framework can offer important insights. As I mentioned before, the consumption cycle in contemporary consumer research usually considers disposition as the last step, after which the consumer is ready to consume something else, although there exists practices such as gift giving that are breaking the boundaries of that cycle. The ‘consumption as a journey’ framework I am suggesting could further extend the lifetime of those objects. What I mean by this is that the experiences of that car owner will live on more or less vividly, with that person for the rest of his life, affecting all the subsequent consumption experiences (s)he has. Further on ownership is a limiting factor in research as well, as that same car can be experienced very differently by other people who use it. Asking someone which cars they have owned previously is not the same as asking them which cars they have spent most time in or which they have been dreaming of having, and surely will provide much different interpretations.

Looking at consumption as a journey, with all of its contrasting emotions is the most lucrative research position in my view. I see it as naïve to focus on for example only the positive aspects of a certain consumption practice. I acknowledge that my framework does not yield linear conclusions or easy answers, but to be fair, which qualitative research method does? By gathering as deep an understanding as we can of the lived consumption experience, I believe we can gain that tacit knowledge I was talking about in the case of that Japanese tattoo master who used it to manifest his art onto the skin with instinctively. Armed with an extensive understanding and knowledge of different consumption practices and consumers, professional marketers should be able to carry out their profession to the best of their abilities, in my opinion.

I think we as marketers could learn so much from craftsmen such as tattooists who are connecting with their customers day in, day out. As a final thought, I would like you to ask yourself, if you would personally know most of your loyal customers, would your companies or organizations marketing and products still be the same?

I feel that we have a responsibility as contemporary cultural producers (Holt, 2002) of what we produce, how it is marketed to people, and how it affects their lives. Much like tattooists have a responsibility of the design and finished tattoo, as well as the impact it has on the future of the person getting tattooed.

CONCLUSION

“Consumers can therefore construct style by selecting opposing meanings available within their discursive space. This is analogous to the creativity involved in the speaking of a language. Speakers are bound by their ability to use a language in the same way that consumers are bound by their resources. Yet, speakers of a language, like consumers, often combine words, and objects, in distinct and extraordinary ways.” (Murray, 2002, p. 428)

Holt (1995) categorized consuming using four metaphors, consuming as experience, consuming as integration, consuming as classification, and consuming as play. My interviewees in this research use consumption in all of those ways, but I see their tattoo consumption as a journey, with people using it much like Murray described language being used, “in distinct and extraordinary ways.” Parts of those journeys I presented here, with the intention of leaving them open for further interpretation. If I had to have a single most important conclusion about tattoo consumption, it would be that it is not about one thing, and you should not try to come to a finite conclusion about any element of it.

The ‘consumption as a journey’ framework I suggest here, could be presented in different forms and should not have strict categories, although the ones Holt (1995) mentions, can be

used as a starting ground. In my research I presented consumer journeys through themes, in contrast to a lot of previous research that have presented lived experiences through personas or personal myths. These themes also formed the chapters of this paper. In the first chapter ‘Complexity of consumption’ we saw how consumers are faced with especially social pressures, and how they are able to overcome uncertainty and doubt, becoming confident consumers. Patterson and Schroeder (2010) argue that previous research has focused its attention to the individual, thus leaving “the communication of identity to others (remain) largely implicit and unproblematic in CCT.” My research shows that it is far from unproblematic.

The second chapter ‘Meaning of being a tattooed person’ looked at what sort of meanings relate to tattoo consumption outside of symbolic meanings of individual tattoos. Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 876) note that “temporality of consumption experiences” is an understudied aspect of consumer research. By looking at people’s lives as a construction that comes together in sometimes weird and unexpected ways, some of which make sense years after, both in this chapter and the third chapter ‘Construction of a distinctive style’ I tried to establish a new way of looking at consumption as something that you experience life with. I also wanted to break free of conventional social meanings associated with tattoos. Traditionally marking group identification, now more tattoo consumers use them for self-expression (Sweetman, 1999; Ruotsalainen, 2014; Velliquette et al., 1998). This self-expression can be seen in how tattoo consumers are able to express their unique styles and aesthetics, while taking influences from other forms of consumption. This was further explained in the fourth and final chapter “Aesthetic”.

I want to emphasize how I wanted to dedicate this research to explaining what consumers do and what type of experiences they have had, and quite literally follow Patterson and Schroeder’s (2010) advice of abandoning the obsession for symbolic meaning, as that has already gained so much attention in consumer research. Also I fully agree with Thompson (2004, 173), that it is not always meaningful to assess whether a consumption practice has liberatory consequences or not, but rather document and try to understand the constructions around it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

Partly why I think my research is able to bring a totally new perspective into consumption theory is because of the unique nature of tattooing as a market. Holt (2002) talks about the postmodern consumer and how (s)he is trying to exercise individual freedom while tapping into the cultural resources that companies offer in the marketplace via products, services and experiences. The consumer has become critical of corporations trying to gain profit in an unsustainable manner and Holt says that consumers are looking for brands that they can “trust to act like a local merchant, as a stalwart citizen of the community.”

Thompson (2004, p. 173) answers to Holt with a rather grim tone, by saying that this is basically a utopia that the capitalist realism, as Fisher (2009) puts it, does not allow as corporations are structured to be profit-driven machines that use “public relations techniques such as greenwashing.” And that those global corporations are hard to track and also play a big role in politics and media, which is why Holt’s “warm analogies to local shopkeepers” can provide a distorted view.

Warm and fuzzy, not always, but tattooists could certainly be described as local shopkeepers. Their actions are easy to track, they definitely do not have a PR-department, and they would question your argument if you said they operate in order to do profit. I think consumer research in the future would greatly benefit from the study of markets where products and services are bought straight from the producers, be it markets where big corporations exist or not.

I also found the research approach of asking ‘what consuming bodies do?’ to be very lucrative and at least in my case, it opened up research opportunities that I could not see when I started out. Combining this with the hermeneutic analysis method suggested by Thompson (1997) did extend the timeframe of my research quite a bit as it required many rounds of iterations before I could form a clear analysis, something to expect in the future.

Analysing the consumer journeys I have been talking about should always be done using a wide range of ideological and academic approaches. This is certainly a challenge due to a variety of constraints, from personal knowledge to organizational structures. What I would like to see in the future, is co-operation between academics from different backgrounds. Rarely do you see for example a sociologist and a consumer researcher as co-authors in a major article. Interdisciplinary collaborations should be actively pursued in academia as well in my opinion.

In terms of tattoo consumption and similar industries where production, consumption, and consumption culture are closely connected, I would like to see comprehensive analysis on how that connectedness affects people. One interesting view could be to study producers that are also active consumers, in my case tattooists. Their unique position as representatives of tattoo culture, consumers of tattoos, and producers could offer an even more immersive view of tattoo consumption and consumption in general.

As I mentioned in the 'Discussion' section, I feel the range of emotions consumption brings out in people, is an important consideration. Hard to put into words, but I sense that without the suppressive norms imposed on some consumers, the freedom of self-expression would not exist. That without all the negative comments and attitudes, the liberatory effect would not be the same. That only by going through the hardship that some consumers face, are they able to free themselves of judgment and construct a coherent self-image.

Interpretive research surely needs to always focus its attention to something, in order to produce understandable results. During my research I felt that I can not describe the positive feelings that tattoo consumption results in, without explaining the contradictory and negative aspects. What Arnould and Thompson (2005) call "myriad messy contexts of everyday life" that Consumer Culture Theory is interested in, can be frustratingly ambiguous, but honest and real. For example, at one point I was considering discourse analysis as a main method for interpreting my interviewees' stories, but felt that it would have highlighted only certain aspects of them at the expense of important contrasting issues. Thus at least in sociocultural

contexts such as tattoo consumption, I personally prefer the hermeneutical framework presented by Thompson (1997).

This method does have its limitations as well though. Perhaps a full discourse analysis would have been able to separate key aspects of those consumption stories in a way that would be more useful in making generalizations for example. Perhaps these methods could be used together better. I would like to see experimental research methods that would for example combine popular qualitative methods or as I said before, have academics from totally different fields working together. With my research as well, I could have focused more on previous sociological, psychological, and cultural research. At times, I felt that consumption theories were inadequate at describing the lived experiences of tattooed people.

As I have mentioned throughout this paper, my subjective view defines this research, as much as I wanted it to present consumers' stories as they were told to me. Surely I portray tattoo consumption through biased lenses, and wish to see it for example removed of its social stigma, something I mentioned in the paper. I also realized that often I took a neutral or supportive stance towards my interviewees. Confronting or challenging them about certain conflicting aspects of their life could have yielded interesting results, a method that mostly remains absent from this study. Further, using academic sources that problematize tattoo consumption such as psychoanalytic studies, and using those theories to challenge consumers could be beneficial, although controversial.

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Attachment 1

Life magazine, May 28, 1951

