A Deviant Art:
Tattoo-Related Stigma in an Era of Commodification

Abstract

In Western society, tattoos have historically signified deviance and those who were tattooed were often stigmatized as a result. Extant research examines the nature of stigma and identifies a number of stigma management strategies adopted by people with tattoos. However, this research was conducted at a time when tattoo art was largely confined to particular groups and members of society. In recent years tattooing has transformed dramatically, such that the practice has become commodified and embedded in everyday production and consumption practices. Consequently, our study examines the changing nature of tattoo-related stigma, and the subsequent impact this has had on the strategies employed by consumers to manage this stigma. Emerging stigma management strategies are identified and discussed within the context of an emergent stigma; the 'stigma of the commodity'.

Introduction

"Tattooed skin ... demands engagement, whether the interlocutor is critical or celebratory of inked flesh" (McCormack, 2006, p.77). Scholarly work on tattooing tends to focus on the motivations behind the practice, motivations that circulate around notions of decoration, protection, ritual and identification (Fisher, 2002). Contrarily, the potential consequences to tattooees of social stigma remain relatively unexplored, with the exception of Irwin's (2001) work on the use of legitimation techniques; narrative accounts designed "to maximize ... the positive benefits of becoming tattooed (independence and autonomy from authority) and minimize the negative meanings associated with tattoos (low class, criminal, dangerous)" (p.54).

Set against the backdrop of traditional associations between tattoos and deviance, and an unparalleled revival in tattoo consumption in recent decades, this paper examines the changing nature of the social stigma of tattoos in consumer culture. Specifically, the paper examines the management of contemporary tattoo-related stigma and identifies, in the context of the multifarious meanings of tattoos, the emergence of a 'stigma of the commodity' particularly associated with the mainstreaming of the practice

Though not always considered an art form (Kosut, 2006a), tattooing was re-imagined during the 'Tattoo Renaissance' in the 1980s (Rubin, 1988). The subsequent three decades have witnessed the revival of traditional and modern forms and provided an increasingly creative medium for tattoo artists and consumers alike (Velliquette, Murray & Creyer, 1998). As a consequence, tattoo art has infiltrated the mainstream, and the identity of tattooees now transcends age, class and ethnic boundaries (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2003; Kosut 2006b). In contrast, historically in Western society, tattoos signified some kind of social deviance, and were generally associated with "working class, blue-collar, bikers, prisoners, punks" (Kosut, 2006b, p.1035). Here, tattoos were considered an underground, countercultural practice and those who were tattooed were often stigmatized as a result.

Neither of these two positions fully capture or account for the complex, nuanced and fluid nature of the 'cultural field' of tattoo art, by which we mean a "social universe in which all participants are at once producers and consumers caught up in a complex web of social, political, economic and cultural relations that they themselves have in part woven and continue to weave" (Ferguson, 1998, p.598). While tattooing has become commercialized, Patterson and Schroeder (2010)

argue that it continues to be marginal in the sense that it is "perceived as a social marking that, if not inscribed on the bodies of deviants, then constitutes a deviant practice on the bodies of individuals" (Fisher, 2002, p.97). Thus, for those who produce and consume tattoo art, the challenge of dealing with the social stigma of tattoos remains, and may even be exacerbated by the state of flux of this cultural field.

The paper continues with a brief historical tour of the consumption of tattoos, shifting from involuntary to voluntary consumption, all the while maintaining connections with otherness, and then embracing the transformation and commodification of the practice brought about by the tattoo renaissance. Next, the paper addresses the issue of stigma, outlining its connection with tattoos and identifying the possible range of stigma management strategies that may be adopted by tattooees. Following a discussion of the methodological approach taken the paper provides the findings from a series of in-depth interviews. By extending the work of Henry and Caldwell (2006) on stigma management the paper contributes to our understanding of the management of tattoo-related stigma. Further, it also enhances our appreciation of management strategies vis-a-vis characterological stigma generally, i.e. those which result from voluntary acts of deviance (Langer, Fiske, Taylor, & Chanowitz, 1976). Here, the paper has implications for a variety of consumer behaviors which might be considered criminal, pathological, or just not normal (Amine & Gicquel, 2011).

The Consumption of Tattoo Art

It was the ancient Greeks who observed their neighbors, the 'barbarian' Thracians, using tattoos as markers of status, and thus they themselves began to deploy tattoos as a denotation of

Otherness: "the material marks on the skin remember, literalizing on the body and signifying in the symbolic, the subject's social difference" (Prosser, 2001, p.55). In an act of subversion, criminals later began to voluntarily tattoo themselves as a means of documenting their criminal careers and constructing an Othered subjectivity (DeMello, 1993; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Shoham, 2010). Voluntary tattooing also spread to the military and navy where tattoos, whatever their design, were used as "markers of an esoteric diversity" (Guest, 2000, p.101), a life lived differently from everyday society (Steward, 1990). Similarly, the practice was taken up by members of the European aristocracy and American upper class for whom tattooing became *de rigeur* in the late 19th Century (Parry, 1933; Sanders, 1989). Bradley (2000) recounts an article in the 1898-9 edition of *Harmsworth's Magazine* that refers to the use of tattooing by royalty as a 'queer craze', rendering them as peculiar and exotic as the 'primitives' from whom they'd borrowed the practice. Bailkin (2005, p.50) contends that upper class tattooing represented "an attempt to invigorate a devalued class, a dying breed … the 'savage' tattoo was the only hope for the aristocracy to modernize, the only way to stay viable in an anti-aristocratic age".

Despite the shift from involuntary to voluntary consumption and the increasing diffusion throughout society, tattoos continued to be thought of as 'freakish' (Fisher, 2002), associated with those on the fringes of society, maintaining allusions to deviance and steeped in stigma (DeMello, 1995). In the latter part of the 20th Century, however, the production and consumption of tattoos witnessed what Rubin (1988) has described as a 'Tattoo Renaissance' where two major forces came together to give tattoos "ethno-historical and aesthetic legitimacy" (Kosut, 2006a, p.1045). First, tattooists began to look to indigenous cultures and their traditional tattoos for inspiration rather than to more modern North American designs (DeMello, 2000). Second, the

world of tattooing was infiltrated by fine artists who began to see it as a legitimate artistic pursuit (Irwin, 2001), while the art world simultaneously accepted tattoo art and artists into its realm (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005). The further anchoring of tattooing within prestigious cultural institutions, such as the body art exhibition at the Guggenheim, New York in 1999, may also be considered to augment the cultural value of tattooing (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). The increasing acceptance of tattooing by these cultural institutions is significant given their crucial role in sanctioning stigma, and also as agents of change (Herek, 2004). The outcome of this renaissance period, and the artistic legitimacy it provided, was a huge shift in the clientele frequenting tattoo parlors. By the 1990's, the tattoo sector was one of the fastest growing service industries in the United States of America (Vale, 1999). Little more than ten years later it is reported that around 40% of American's aged between 26 and 40 have tattoos while the figure is 29% for British 16 to 44 year-olds (Henley, 2010). This mainstreaming of tattoo art has been further fueled by the growing number of celebrities and public figures that have them, and by the expanded use of tattooed models in advertisements (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, & Bengtsson, 2013), and by its increasing visibility in the media generally (Kosut, 2006b). The representation of tattooing in the media is particularly interesting in that television programs such as *Miami Ink* serve to sanitize tattooing by populating their world with heavily tattooed individuals, removing any notions of stigma, excising the pain involved in the process, predicating the choice of tattoos on some deep-seated personal meaning, and foregrounding only custom pieces with a high degree of artistic merit. Ultimately, then, the mainstreaming of tattoo culture has occurred within the parameters of a new ideology of tattooing established by cultural institutions. Following Thompson and Hirschman (1995, p. 147), these media representations have normalized cultural ideals of the tattooed body and problematized deviations from them.

Infused with cultural meaning, tattoos operate as symbolic resources for identity practices. Thus, we may attribute part of the recent expansion of tattoo consumption to their use in aiding self expression, identity construction, differentiation, marking life events and the celebration of rites of passage (Atkinson, 2004; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006). Tattoos may have particular appeal in postmodern markets that offer a vast choice of commodities to construct identities and which emphasize the individual's responsibility to limitlessly improve and change themselves (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010). The notion of the self has been destabilized through the commodification of culture and the pressure of refining contingent identities that are never completed. This has led to a state of identity politics, perfectly illustrated by tattooing, where there is a tension between the desire for liberation to act freely in the creation of the self and the social forces that regulate behavior and social interaction. Tattoos, are often seen to ameliorate the uncertainty and confusion engendered by the postmodern fragmentation of identity, by anchoring identity and providing stability for the malleable and versatile body (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005). They are viewed as permanent marks in the skin that defy change and anchor the self (Sweetman, 1999). However, Patterson and Schroeder (2010) question such a stance by suggesting that tattoos are generally open to multiple interpretations, their designs may be altered through extension and modification, and the narrative justifications for them may evolve across time and context. As such, tattoo practices bear witness to the tensions between the search for a coherent self and the liberatory potential of the fragmented self.

DeMello (1995) contends that changes in the media's presentation of tattoos, and their inclusion in both the fashion and art systems has affected the symbolism circulating the world of tattoo,

potentially weakening the link between tattoos, deviance and marginality. Arguably, the meanings associated with tattooing are muddied when tattoos are adopted by a wider demographic, and they become a symbol of the "rock star, model and post modern youth" (DeMello, 1995, p.49). What this suggests is that the mainstreaming and commodification of tattooing has in fact destabilized the meanings, practices and place of tattooing in contemporary society (Richins, 1994), resulting in a more complex and nuanced cultural field. This destabilization of meanings becomes particularly evident in studies of the perceptions held about tattooed women. This is because, in becoming tattooed, women more clearly engage in what Holbrook, Block, and Fitzsimons (1998, p.21) refer to as 'refiguration' or intentional deviance from prevailing norms of personal appearance. For example, Wohlrab, Fink, Kappeler and Brewer, (2009) showed that women with tattoos are perceived more negatively than women without. Specifically, they are seen as less physically attractive, more sexually promiscuous and heavier drinkers (Swami and Furnham, 2007), associated with having a mind fraught with disorder (Atkinson, 2004), all of which can be handicaps in sexual selection (Wohlrab et al., 2009). On the other hand, tattooed women feel that their tattoos to contribute to their personal sense of uniqueness (Tiggemann & Golder, 2006) while Horne, Knox, Zusman, and Zusman (2007), in their investigation of 400 undergraduates, found that 60% of men viewed women with tattoos as attractive. This array of perceptions surrounding tattoos has led to a diffusion of cultural habits and attitudes towards the art (Atkinson, 2004), raising interesting questions about the relationship between tattoos and stigma.

Stigma Management

The term *stigma* actually originates from the Greek process of marking criminal and slave bodies with tattoos. Thus, *stigma* has passed into our own language to mean a 'mark of infamy' (Jones, 2000, p.1); a physical mark denoting shame or disgrace (Goffman, 1963). According to Henry and Caldwell (2006, p.1033) stigmatization is part of the fabric of everyday life as people conform to a greater or lesser degree to social norms. The core feature of stigma is that an individual possesses an attribute communicating their lack of conformity to societal norms. Stigma does not occur within an individual but within a context and depends on the norms a person finds themselves subject to (Yang, Kleinman, Link, Phelan, Lee & Good, 2007). For example, for many years Atkinson (2004) presented images of body modification from tribal communities outside Western culture during his teaching without receiving any complaints. However, once he presented comparable images of body modifications from Western individuals he received complaints that the images were vulgar and inappropriate. This affirms that the norms, meanings and associations we have with our skin are cultural and learned (Patterson *&* Schroeder, 2010), and that they contribute to the development of normative stereotypes (Goffman, 1963). Stereotyping serves as a psychological process to help us simplify and digest all the available information and categorize behaviors so that we can begin to understand others more efficiently (Fiske, Neuberg, Beatie & Milberg, 1987). This enables us make instant judgements on others without having to process and evaluate a vast array of information about each individual we encounter. In this way, we link attributes such as tattoos to assumptions about an individual's character (Goffman, 1963); physical appearance becoming shorthand for the moral character within (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010).

Physical stigmas are those with which individuals are born such as birth defects. In contrast, characterological stigmas are considered to be behavioral and the responsibility of the individual. Those possessing a characterological stigma typically have acquired their deviant status through the commission of deviant acts, such as becoming tattooed (Langer *et al*., 1976; DeJong, 1980). This influences the attitude 'normals' take towards the stigmatizing attribute (e.g. a tattoo), as the "defect" is not inherited but acquired. Thus, tattooed individuals may not receive the same amount of sympathy nor necessarily the same reactions from 'normals' as individuals with stigma connected to physical misfortune. This lack of sympathy and understanding can lead stigmatized individuals to suffer if they are confronted with stigma over a prolonged period of time. For tattooed individuals this distress can surface even before becoming tattooed when anticipated social reactions lead to anxiety (Irwin, 2001). The ability to mobilize strategies to deal with stigma becomes significant because those facing prolonged stigmatization can suffer psychological consequences such as low self esteem and feelings of shame (Askegaard, Gertsen & Langer, 2002). In general, stigmatized individuals receive less help, face glass ceilings in terms of career advancement, receive fewer positive verbal cues and encounter awkward social interactions more frequently (Lavack, 2006; Miller and Kaiser, 2001; Shih, 2004). In an effort to ameliorate these consequences individuals develop ways to live that maintain and balance their tattooed and social status.

[Table 1: Stigma Management Strategies]

Three frameworks of stigma management strategies (Table 1) identify the variety of ways that individuals protect themselves from, and manage the negative consequences of prolonged

stigmatization. Irwin (2001) applies stigma management to the specific context of tattooing. She focuses on anticipated reactions and the techniques individuals adopt to safeguard their identities from an expected disapproval of close relations. These legitimation techniques can "rescue individuals from negative sanctions during face to face interactions" (Irwin, 2001, p.61). As these techniques can be useful in alleviating anticipated stigma, it may be assumed that extensions of them might help tattooees after they acquire a tattoo.

Henry and Caldwell (2006), in their study of socially disadvantaged heavy metal enthusiasts, take into account the complex nature of stigma and the different effects and variables that influence the way a stigmatizing attribute is perceived. Stigmatized individuals elicit multiple responses and often employ several strategies simultaneously or independently of each other. Feedback on one strategy can lead to the deployment of another. As stress responses are dynamic, multifaceted and interdependent (Miller & Kaiser, 2001) identifying management strategies is a trial and error process that people practice in different situations, learning over time what strategies are appropriate for certain situations.

In the context of stigma management strategies generally, Shih (2004) identifies two categories; coping and empowerment. Coping strategies attempt to avoid negative consequences whereas empowerment strategies focus not only on avoiding negative outcomes, but also on understanding the social world and creating positive outcomes (Shih, 2004). The perceived legitimacy of the stigma determines whether individuals adopt coping or empowerment strategies. As tattooing is a characterological stigma, tattooed individuals are seen to be responsible for their status, and therefore the sanctions imposed by 'normals' may be perceived

as perfectly legitimate. Following Shih's (2004) logic, these individuals would then tend to employ coping strategies to protect identity rather than to actively generate enriching interactions.

Three common themes link these frameworks: the manipulation of self-perceptions, the manipulation of others' perceptions, and the management of multiple identities. Managing stigma in these ways is challenging enough when countervailing norms are static. However, as a result of long-held associations between tattoos and deviance, and the more recent tattoo renaissance and subsequent mainstreaming of tattoo culture, tattoos are now more likely to invite unpredictable associations. Thus, it might be expected that the approach of tattooed individuals to stigma management is characterized by an ever increasing degree of complexity. To this end, this study examines the changing nature of the social stigma of tattoos in contemporary consumer culture. Further, it identifies the range of stigma management strategies adopted by tattooees to protect their social status.

Methodology

Developing a detailed understanding of such a complex, personal and potentially emotional phenomenon required an interpretive, in-depth research approach. In-depth interviews allow for a confidential setting in which participants may feel more able to reveal their experiences of stigmatization. Therefore, McCracken's (1988) method of long interviewing was employed in an effort to "step into the mind of another person and experience the world as they do themselves" (p.9), thus privileging the experiences of our informants over any *a priori* conceptual beliefs that we may have had (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). This method of enquiry lends itself to

an understanding of how our informants make sense of their world and thereby provides an insight into their perceptual process.

Purposive sampling was utilized where both tattooed and non-tattooed participants were sought, in order to explore understandings of tattoo-related stigma from both in-group and out-group perspectives. However, discussions of stigma-management strategies were extended only in the case of participants with tattoos. In order to find suitable candidates, chain referrals were used such that participants were recruited through informal social networks. This approach has a long history in the study of deviant behavior (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) and assisted greatly in gaining and building the trust of participants, enabling more open discussions of potentially difficult topics relating to the stigma interviewees were subjected to. In total, ten participants were included in the study (Table 2). Three of the participants had no tattoos, though one of these, Emma, did have a concealable body piercing. Three other participants had tattoos all of which were concealable, while four others were heavily and obviously tattooed.

[Table 2: Participant Profile]

Interviews began with deliberately open questions in order to explore feelings and attitudes towards tattoos and the meanings associated with tattoo art. This provided participants with an opportunity to highlight and discuss what they felt were the important issues with regard to tattoo-related stigma. As the topic of responses to tattoos arose, probes and questions about the participants own experiences in dealing with stigma were posed. In addition, hypothetical scenarios of 'awkward social situations' were presented to participants in the manner of a

projective technique, in order to further explore attitudes, feelings, meanings and experiences of tattoo art and stigma. Following Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) holistic-content analysis was initially employed to make sense of individual interviews individually. Here, thematic analysis focuses on each individual transcript as a coherent entity in itself in order to identify key themes without de-contextualising the data. Each interview was thus read thoroughly, key themes were identified, and a summary was produced to assist discussions among the researchers. Next, the emergent themes were used to provide categories to aid analysis across the range of interviews, in line with the categorical-content approach. This was deemed appropriate because categorical approaches are adopted when the phenomenon is shared by a group of people. The two approaches were then combined in order to identify common themes across the participants' stories without overlooking the way that a theme related to each story as whole. These themes are presented in the remainder of the paper.

The Changing Nature of Tattoo Related Stigma in Contemporary Culture

In light of the multi-dimensional and uncertain nature of contemporary tattoo-related stigma, self-referencing underpinned all of the strategies adopted by both tattooed and non-tattooed participants. Individuals referred to an object within their own self concept in order to help them understand others' tattoos (Richins, 1994). Emma's belly button piercing, a body modification regarded by her as meaningful, formed the basis of her interpretation: "*It's* [tattooing] *not my preference but it's how you impress yourself. Like my piercing to me, it means something to them personally and it will have a story*". Emma used her own body modification as a compass by which to orient her understanding of those who have tattoos. For her the piercing is meaningful

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and thus she reads others' tattoos as self-expressive and central to their identity. Similarly, Mick used his own tattoo as a benchmark to evaluate whether other tattoos were sensible choices:

Because I've had mine as long as I have I always look and think, what's that going to look like in twenty years time. If they've chosen something with a border and perfect outline or something intricate that is going to smudge and go blurry I think, was that such a good idea?

To Mick, if a tattoo is likely to fade or age badly then the choice of the artwork is considered unwise. These participants used their self experiences to help them manage how, who and what specific assumptions to apply to tattoos, shifting the judgement of stigma from social to personal norms.

Despite mainstreaming, tattoos remain a stigmatized and stigmatizing art form. Many expressions of the longstanding 'stigma of deviance' can be observed in the data, particularly in the responses of non-tattooed participants to the question of what tattoos mean to them. For example, Gavin commented that tattoos were "s*igns of a bad person*" and "*associated with the mafia*", while Alice noted "*tattoos are always seen in children's cartoons on baddies, burglars and pirates. And as a child the only people that I ever saw with tattoos were big hairy bikers or builders*". There was little reflection on the part of participants as to why they held particular associations and the exact associations (e.g. Mafia, baddies, burglar, pirates) differed across participants. Simply having a tattoo appears to stigmatize the tattooed individual, although the stigma can be modified by perceived personality and character traits. For example, Gavin explained:

If someone who you already think badly of has a tattoo, then the tattoo just multiplies the effect and makes you think, yeah I was right to think that. But if it is someone who is nice and timid and quiet and then they have one, it's quite cool and shows their hidden side. And that can be quite exciting.

Similarly, Michelle recounts the first time she showed her tattoos to her father:

My dad said, 'One thing I hate is these women who've got big tattoos on their arms ... they look cheap and nasty. It's like they have no intelligence'. So, I showed him mine for the first time, and I said 'Well, I'm intelligent, and I'm not cheap. What do you think of that?' And he said 'I know you, it's different'.

Also, the context and location of the encounter can influence the reaction to tattoo art. As Gavin explains:

There's this one guy, and I see him in the library quite a lot and he is quite hard-working, but he has two massive [tattoo] *sleeves on his arms. I mean what kind of statement is that? If I saw him in Brixton I would actually be quite nervous and probably cross the road.*

The seemingly non-threatening environment of a library negates the 'stigma of deviance' associated with the tattoos. However, when viewed in a stigmatized setting (a neighborhood perceived as dangerous), the tattoo is understood as a signifier of deviance. An exception to the situational nature of responses to the stigma of tattoos is observed in the case of facial tattoos which were viewed as extreme and socially unacceptable in any context (DeMello, 2007).

The situation is further complicated, as the form or aesthetics of the tattoo itself have also become a source of stigma. Reactions to, and judgements of the practice of tattooing were often framed as being conditional on the artistic merit of the tattoo. When participants were asked about their attitudes and feelings towards tattoo art, many replied with qualifying statements such as "*well, it depends…*" and "*what kind of tattoo are we talking about?*" It seems that the elevation of the tattoo to artistic status during the tattoo renaissance, and the almost exclusive representation of highly artistic custom pieces in the media have framed even lay interpretations of tattoos. Here, distinctions also arose between the 'stigma of deviance' and what we have termed the 'stigma of the commodity'. The attribution of stigma can come from both non-tattooed **and** tattooed people; non-tattooed individuals often attributing stigma based on the apparent deviance of those who are tattooed, while tattooed individuals attribute stigma to other tattooed individuals based on the commodified nature of their tattoos (e.g. tattoos based on mass produced 'flash' art), or their lack of authentic engagement with tattoo culture. Participants who were tattooed described how they read and interpret the tattoos of others from their own position and norms on tattooing. For example, when Alan (tattooed) was asked if it would affect him if a hypothetical potential girlfriend had tattoos he replied:

> *Well it depends, if they were meaningful and special and she had thought about them carefully then no. But if they were just random impulsive tattoos or just to look nice then that would bother me yeah. Because I just think if you made an impulsive decision like that with tattoos, what other random things will you do, will you just leave our son at home alone while you pop to the shops or will you cheat on me.*

Similarly, Jane (tattooed) commented: "*Some people just go and get* [expletive removed] *tattoos, they don't do it properly.*" The common characteristic of these stigmatized tattoos is that they are impersonal, subject to fashion, obtained in order to 'show off' and therefore lack an authentic, personal meaning. Being authentic within tattoo culture is important (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), particularly for heavily tattooed individuals and, as Mick explained: "s*o many blokes at work will have them, on their legs, their arms, and then always wear a vest and shorts all through winter even to show off their painted bodies*". Mick recognizes that by openly displaying their tattoos his workmates are being authentic and engaging in "a form of expressive activism from which the mainstream bodily and social orders are put in question as well as a social display of their life politics and escape lifestyles" (Ferreira, 2011, p.18). Thus, contrary to the view that the mainstreaming of tattoo art would lead to a weakening of the association of tattoos and stigma, tattoo-related stigma in contemporary consumer culture has become even more complex for tattooees to manage as it is complex, diverse and nuanced. No longer a one-dimensional stigma related to the act of tattooing, imposed by those that do not have tattoos on those that do, tattoo-related stigma is now multi-dimensional. Rather, it may be located in the act of having a tattoo ('stigma of deviance') and/or in the aesthetics of the tattoo itself or in the level of commitment to tattoo culture ('stigma of the commodity'), and it can be imposed by those without tattoos (out-group) and/or by tattooees themselves (in-group).

Stigma Management Strategies

Instances of each of the stigma management strategies identified in the existing literature (the manipulation of self-perceptions, the manipulation of others' perceptions, and the management of multiple identities) were observed. Participants evidenced the manipulation of self perceptions

by compensating for their tattoos in social environments. For example, sometimes efforts are made to balance the tattoos with a more mainstream aesthetic. Terri outlines: "*I think ... Well, I think I'm quite well turned out anyway. I don't dress scruffy or anything like that. So, I get away with it. Right now I look quite feminine, so I can balance it*". Here, Terri describes her attempts to balance her tattooed 'look' with a more traditionally feminine 'look' in an effort to ameliorate the reactions she gets in public. By paying attention to her grooming routine and otherwise adhering to the norms of 'emphasized femininity' (Connell, 1987) she feels she has a better chance of 'passing' in conventional society.

In terms of the manipulation of others' perceptions, participants attempted to ground the meaning of their tattoos through the use of anecdotes, in order to exert control over the interpretation and, therefore, reactions of others. By explaining the circumstances under which a tattoo was acquired, what it means to them, how they feel about their tattoos now, what difference it has made to them as a person, and the experiences they subsequently have encountered, tattooed individuals allow the meaning and desired interpretation of a tattoo to be clarified. Mick shared a story of an experience he had while on holiday sunbathing and unable to hide his tattoo:

> *When we were away, a young lad, not much older than you, came over and asked if he could get a closer look at my tattoo 'cause he said he loved old ones. So, you know, I let him take a look and bored him with the story of it.*

As tattoos are seen as integral to a person's self definition (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), non-tattooed individuals are keen to understand who the person was before the tattoo and what aspects they wished to embed into their self concept with the tattoo. Further, the representation

of tattoo culture in mainstream media obliges tattooed individuals to be prepared with a narrative justification of their artwork. Often 'normals' will expect, invite or sometimes demand to hear the story of a tattoo, and those who are tattooed are often ready to oblige (Atkinson, 2004). Alice spoke about the explanation she would expect from a hypothetical boyfriend who was tattooed:

> *If a boyfriend had a tattoo I would want to know when it was done and what it meant, well everything about it really. I would expect them to tell me the story behind it; they cost a lot of money and you have to pick a design and it's just so extreme I would want to know why*".

Moreover, Emma explained how anecdotes changed her perceptions of a tattooed colleague: "*At first I thought, oh no what has she done to her body. Then I got to know her and find out her story and she is lovely*." From the tattooees point of view, this strategy is adopted instrumentally in order to influence perceptions of themselves. For example, Jane expects people to judge her character in a particular way as a result of her anecdotes: "*I think they show that actually I am a caring person, who is close to my family, and actually there is a lot more to me than people think*".

Alan takes the manipulation of others' perceptions a stage further by deploying humor to protect the sentimental meaning of his tattoos from the judgment of others:

> *With strangers if they don't ask I won't tell them. And if they do ask, it's a bit of a defense mechanism, but I would make a joke about it. I don't know why I need to explain personal stuff about myself to every Tom, Dick and Harry on the street.*

Any stigmatization resulting from such humor-infused interactions is not internalized as Alan views the responses as unrelated to the real meaning and nature of his tattoos. Here, Alan has offered a "decoy" meaning in order to defend himself from any negative judgements on his character based on his tattoos.

With respect to managing multiple identities, and despite the need to be authentic and to openly display tattoos, concealment (Henry & Caldwell, 2006) was the most commonly adopted strategy. All participants, with the exception of Jim who has a facial tattoo, scar and piercing, rely on this method foremost, particularly in professional contexts. Concealment avoided the social consequences of stigma as the participants' tattoos were removed from display and thus they could foreground another of their identity positions. Jane specifically purchased clothes to cover her tattoos when going to interviews: "*I always wear tights and make sure I am not wearing a white shirt so that they* [interviewers] *cannot see my tattoos*". Similarly, Lucy assesses the context she's going to find herself in before deciding whether to display or conceal her tattoos:

> *I love my tattoos, but if I was going somewhere, like a nice restaurant, where I thought they might attract the wrong kind of attention and make me feel uncomfortable, then yeah, I'd cover up.*

Even in situations where others knew the respondent was tattooed, concealment was still seen as an effective and valuable strategy. Alice explains:

You should cover up your tattoos at work definitely. Changing your appearance for

the job shows that you care and are trying to make an effort. It just shows you are

considering others.

Emergent Stigma Management Strategies

Stigma management strategies not captured in the frameworks outlined earlier were also observed. These reflect the changing nature of tattoo-related stigma in contemporary culture. For example, tattoo-related stigma may also be managed by association or disassociation with certain types of reference groups. Participants described how they did not want to be associated with people with certain types of tattoo, or in the case of non-tattooed participants, with those with tattoos. Here, these participants are trying to avoid stigma by association (Argo & Main, 2008). Alice, who has no tattoos herself, has many friends with visible tattoos and made great efforts to circumscribe her interactions with them in an attempt to avoid stigmatization:

Lots of my friends have tattoos and I would never invite them to the gallery [her place

of work] *as I don't want to be associated with their whole immature attitude over*

body modifications.

Reference groups, such as Alice's friendship group, have significant relevance upon an individual's evaluations, aspirations and behavior. By expressing her disassociation from that group in certain contexts, she asserts her different aspirations and behaviors. Explicit "not me" statements also came from tattooed individuals in reference to the 'stigma of the commodity'.

Alan claimed that his tattoos are not: "*standard gobby English lad on holiday in a football shirt tattoos*", while Jim explained:

> *Usually if you've got a tattoo people start to talk to you. If a bloke comes over to me with a British Bulldog with England on, it doesn't mean we have anything in common, I just think, no, I'm not your mate.*

Here then we have a strategy that is similar to enclave withdrawal but is much more nuanced than simple divisions between those with and without tattoos. Rather, we see in the data a situation in which non-tattooed individuals form friendship groups with tattooed individuals but who are careful about the situations in which those friendships are made evident. Similarly, we see some tattooed individuals distancing themselves from others who they view as even more stigmatized. Jim, has facial tattoos, which, because they are highly visible evidence a degree more commitment to tattoo culture (Phelan & Hunt, 1998). He provides an even more far-reaching example of this strategy - what we will call *disengagement*. Jim understood that people were going to make judgements and stigmatize him because of his facial tattoos, and that this would be beyond his control. In order to avoid this stigma, Jim withdrew from society, even leaving his job as a body piercer where such tattoos might be considered more acceptable. His basic position is that he is not interested in explaining his tattoos to people:

> *As I don't give a* [expletive removed] *what people think about me to be honest, if they want to think I'm like that then fine. I try and ignore the world as much as possible. I don't want to get involved in what other people think as I am not interested.*

Jim's strategy was driven in part by observations he had made about the changing norms and values surrounding tattooing as a result of mainstreaming and commodification:

> *One of the reasons I stopped, after ten years of really enjoying what I did, was because the customers were coming in and it was like buying a handbag, if they had the money they expected you to do whatever they said, and I just started thinking well, am I a piercer or am I a prostitute? They didn't know why they were getting it done and not giving any serious thought to what they were doing.*

Sometimes, however, these stigma management strategies do not work to negate the associated stigma. This failure leads some to the understanding that sometimes, because of the unpredictable spectrum of attitudes and beliefs surrounding tattoo art, stigmatization is inevitable. In this case, participants did not attempt to defend their ego, but accepted the tattoo-related stigma. Both Mick and Alan accepted the associated stigma because they perceive the benefits of the tattoo outweigh the social consequences. Mick knew prior to becoming tattooed that his then girlfriend would disapprove, but he acquired the tattoo regardless: "*It does not bother me at all what people think, no, not at all does that ever bother me*". He also accepted that tattoos always incite a reaction and that this is intrinsic to human nature and uncontrollable:

> *You can't not judge people with a tattoo, people will turn their noses up at me, but how many times do we do it to others. It's not fair but it's just the way humans judge each other.*

This awareness of the implications of acquiring a tattoo and the allowance of judgements to be made without interference spares a tattooee from having to manage stigma.

In sum, these findings do suggest that recent changes with the cultural field of tattooing have had an impact on the stigma management strategies employed by tattooed individuals. These individuals do continue to employ established strategies such as the manipulation of self-perceptions, the manipulation of others' perceptions, and the management of multiple identities. However, as the world of tattoo has become commodified stigma management has become a more complex and nuanced process and new strategies have come into being. In particular, the data suggests the emergence of a new tattoo-related stigma, the 'stigma of the commodity' which has implications beyond the world of tattooing.

Discussion and Conclusions

Contributing to the literature on stigma management is important, as the consequences of prolonged stigmatization can have a deleterious effect on the social integration and psychological status of the stigmatized individual. If stigmatized individuals are unable to manage and cope with stigma they are destined to suffer. By understanding how individuals overcome the harmful consequences of stigma as the nature of stigma changes, the foundations have been laid for the development of these strategies into actionable guidance.

Until recent years, the interpretation of "Western" tattoos was effectively captured by the 'stigma of deviance'. The change in social attitudes over such a short period of time has been remarkable, and the complexity of contemporary tattoo culture requires individuals to consider a much broader range of attributes in drawing interpretations of tattoos. These attributes include, but are not necessarily limited to: the context in which the tattoos are displayed, personal

knowledge of the tattooee, the narrative justifications provided by tattooed individuals, the aesthetic merit of the tattoo, and the perceived uniqueness of the tattoo. The current lack of consensus about tattoo-related stigma has resulted in a greater need for people to interpret tattoos and determine their significance on an individual basis. When faced with unstable social norms they often look internally at aspects of their own self concept as a foundation for their interpretations.

Participants demonstrated how they had developed strategies for managing tattoo-related stigma that reflected those contained within the literature, and we see how these strategies play out in the context of a more complex and multifarious type of stigma. They demonstrated the ability to manipulate self perceptions by attempting to 'balance' their tattoos with a more mainstream look. Here, they believed that adherence to certain normalised ideals of the body afforded them licence to deviate from others. Participants were also able to manipulate the perceptions of others by employing explanatory narratives for their tattooed status. They treated social interaction as an opportunity to share anecdotes and exert some control over others' interpretations of their tattoos. Personal narratives were required both to anchor others' interpretations and to demonstrate that the choice of tattoo had been thoughtful and meaningful. Finally, participants managed multiple identities by choosing situations where concealing their tattoos facilitated their passage through conventional social situations. Clearly, contemporary consumer culture values the plasticity of the body (Thompson & Hirschman 1998) and individuals are encouraged to work upon and care for their bodies. At the same time the paradigm of plasticity suggests that individuals are responsible for their bodies and that those bodies are considered a reflection of the moral character within (Slater, 1997). Thus, while tattooed bodies do represent an

engagement with body projects, some tattoos do still represent an effort to escape the homogeneity of consumer culture (Franklin-Reible, 2006) and, thus, continue to carry connotations of deviance. As such, tattooed individuals are still called upon to package, market and sell themselves (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Each of the stigma management strategies outlined here represent an effort to overcome the stigma attached to tattoos and to pass as 'normal'. "Because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (Goffman, 1963, p. 74).

The data presented here also point to individuals protecting their identities by removing themselves from 'stigma by association', disengaging entirely, or accepting their stigmatized status. While there are clearly instances in which non-tattooed individuals disassociate from those with tattoos, we also witness similar lines being drawn within tattoo culture itself. Tattooing no longer seems to be a practice that binds all who engage in it. Individuals wanted to avoid associations with certain reference groups in order to advance their own self concepts by stating "my tattoo is not…". Some tattooed individuals are forced disengage and thus to remove themselves almost entirely from social interactions. Here, negative evaluations by 'normals' and frustrations brought about by the commodification of a lifestyle that they value tremendously push them to avoid interpersonal interaction as much as possible. Accepting stigmatization, and choosing not to defend the ego, manipulate others' interpretations or constantly manage identity to bring about positive evaluations of a tattoo, seems to be the most psychologically healthy strategy evidenced here. This mindset relieved tattooees of the emotionally taxing process of constantly having to assess their environment and decide which strategy would be most successful in protecting their identity. This state of acceptance acknowledges the stigmatizing

attribute as voluntary, accounts for the perceived legitimacy of the stigma, but regards the stigmatized identity as superior to a fragmented ego (Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005).

Perhaps the most important contribution of this work surrounds the notion of the 'stigma of the commodity'. Stigma (including tattoo-related stigma) has long been understood as signifying deviance, or a lack of conformity to social norms. Extant research that examines stigma management strategies adheres to the conceptualization of the 'stigma of deviance'. For example, Irwin (2001) who looked specifically at the context of tattoos show that tattooed individuals use legitimation techniques to legitimate their tattoos within social norms and to gain mainstream acceptance. The 'stigma of the commodity' inverts this, instead stigmatizing those who adhere too closely to social norms as made manifest in popular culture and fashion in an increasingly market-mediated world. The 'stigma of the commodity' differs from the 'stigma of deviance' in the following ways:

1. The 'stigma of deviance' signifies a lack of adherence to the fashions of the time. In contrast, the 'stigma of the commodity' is associated with an adherence to fashion and market forces or the commodity form of art and objects. In a world characterized by the commercialization of rebellion (Frank & Weiland, 1997) it is often difficult to distinguish between counter culture and corporate culture (Halnon, 2005). Recent work within the consumer research domain and beyond (see Halnon 2002; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) has evidenced how consumers might reclaim a stigmatized identity or consumption practice and render it fashionable. The work presented here also suggests a reverse movement where the fashionable becomes stigmatized.

2. The 'stigma of the commodity' is attached to that which is impersonal, superficial and similar, whereas the 'stigma of deviance' is the stigma of the personal, individual and otherness. Here, lack of authenticity is a major factor in the attribution of stigmatized status and individuals strive to get "closer to the self" and reject commodified styles, establishing "the imagined mainstream, as a straw man against whom one can set oneself off as more authentic" (Michael, 2013, n.p.).

3. Because authenticity must come from the self, the attribution of stigma is also determined according to individual rather than social norms. Individual norms are multiple, varied and fluid, and they coagulate around notions of personal, as opposed to market-mediated meanings, determinations of authenticity, and aesthetic judgements.

4. Stigmatizers can, therefore, be people who also carry the potentially stigmatizing attribute, but in a more authentic or legitimate form. Thus, stigma can originate both within and outside the stigmatized group.

5. The strategies for managing commodity stigma are likely to focus on creating and managing personal meaning, achieving autonomy, and establishing authenticity rather than on protecting the ego and legitimating the attribute in relation to social norms.

The emergence and development of commodity stigma warrants further examination in order to gain a full understanding of its nature, character and scope. 'Stigma of the commodity' has much potential to provide insight into the interplay of the personal, social, cultural and political forces in arts marketing and consumption, and also how the commercialization of the relationship between art and audiences/consumers plays out in areas of contemporary everyday life such as identity politics, social status and popular culture.

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Table 1: Stigma Management Strategies

	Irwin (2001) *Legitimation Techniques*	Henry and Caldwell (2006) *Consumption Remedies*	Shih (2004) *Psychological Processes*
Theme			
The Manipulation of Self Perceptions	**Using Mainstream Motivations**: Framing tattoos as celebrations of mainstream social values. **Committing to Conventional Behavior**: Proving they can remain active in conventional pursuits whilst tattooed.	**Resignation**: Becoming depressed, feeling powerless and seeking instant gratification. **Mainstream Engagement**: Participating in mainstream domains despite stigmatization. **Escapism**: Engaging in fantasy. **Spiritualism**: Associating the self with a context superseding stigmatizing attributes. **Nostalgia**: Dwelling on a past perceived better and fairer. **Hedonism**: Disengaging temporarily from the stresses of everyday oppressions through leisure based enjoyment.	**Compensation:** Trying harder, being more persistent or assertive, refining social interaction skills, and disconfirming stereotypes.
The Manipulation of Others' Perceptions	**Offering Verbal Neutralizations**: Justifying their tattoos and their desire for tattoos, and condemning those who disapprove of tattoos.	**Confrontation**: Confronting others through the use of aggressive symbols or violent and destructive acts. **Enclave Withdrawal**: Seeking refuge amongst those who are similarly stigmatized and where they are better accepted. **Creative Production**: De-emphasizing stigmatizing domains and seeking out social spaces where they can establish their own societal norms.	**Strategic Interpretations of Social Environment:** Measuring against those similarly stigmatised with worse outcomes.

The Management of Multiple Identities	Conforming to Conventional Aesthetics: Choosing tattoo artwork that is discreet and that departs from anti-social styles.	Concealment: Hiding signifiers from disapproving others.	Multiple Identities: Alternating identities to defend themselves.

Table 2: Participant Profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Tattoos
Alan	Male	21	Electrician and Air Force Cadet	Three, all concealable
Gavin	Male	20	Student	None
Mick	Male	50	Truck driver	One, concealable
Jim	Male	45	Body piercer	Heavily tattooed, including face
Emma	Female	21	Student	None (body piercing)
Lucy	Female	30	Tattooist	Heavily tattooed
Jane	Female	21	Student	Four, all concealable
Terri	Female	34	Tattooist	Heavily tattooed
Alice	Female	20	Student	None
Michelle	Female	28	Artist	Heavily tattooed