

Study Examines Role of Tattoos in Construction of Personal Identity

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Marketing experts know that consumers use products to help construct personal identity. When a person decides to purchase a Hummer rather than a Prius, for instance, that person is also buying a certain lifestyle or attitude. And with so many products to choose from, it is easy to change one's identity by simply purchasing different products.

But what about tattoos? For marketing researchers, tattoos present interesting questions because unlike clothes, jewelry, cars and even houses, tattoos do not change. They are permanent, infinitely customized and essentially immutable products. A University of Arkansas researcher says people use tattoos as a way to find meaning, permanence and stability - and thus a coherent identity - in an increasingly complex and fragmented world.

They do this through the power of story, said Jeff Murray, marketing professor in the Sam M. Walton College of Business. Each tattoo can be viewed as a symbol of an episode or scene in the narrative of one's life. Perhaps more poignantly, Murray refers to these stories as personal myths, which other researchers have defined as stories that bring together a wide range of experience into a purposeful and convincing whole.

"We continue to be struck by rapid and unpredictable change," Murray said. "Some theorists talk it about in terms of postmodernism, which is one way of saying that our culture has become fractured. Consumer culture reflects this situation, as consumers adapt to these changes by

varying their lifestyle. They downshift, upgrade, change their hair, body, clothes, car, house, career, geographic location and even family. The result is a loss of personal anchors needed for identity. We found that tattoos provide this anchor. Their popularity reflects a need for stability, predictability, permanence and identity."

To develop in-depth analyses of a variety of individual life stories, Murray selected seven subjects - three women and four men - with a breadth of life experience. The youngest was 22; the oldest 58. Two were married, three were single, one was a widower and one was divorced. Some had children, and others did not. The subjects represented diverse occupations, including college student, college professor, construction worker, medical courier, artist, waitress and manager of an exotic boutique.

Murray and his graduate students conducted unstructured, in-depth interviews with the above subjects. The interviews were audio-taped, and each interview lasted from one to slightly more than two hours. Questions focused on the meaning of the tattoo design, the experience of being tattooed, perceptions of the body, words the subjects used to describe themselves and other biographical information. Then an interpretive group, consisting of Murray and three co-authors, met once a week to read the transcribed interviews aloud and discuss potential interpretations.

Focusing on temporal sequencing of key events and narrative movement leading to the formation of a personal myth for each subject, group members then sought common story lines between individual narratives. They identified two predominant themes: stories of redemption and stories of contamination. Narrative sequences of redemption moved from an emotionally negative or bad scene to an emotionally positive or good outcome. For example, one subject had several tattoos to symbolize her journey of healing from the grief she felt because of the death of her

parents.

Conversely, narrative sequences of contamination moved from good to bad. In this case, positive experience was spoiled or contaminated by a bad outcome. One subject, for example, had several tattoos in obvious, easy-to-see places on his body. When he got the tattoos, they symbolized a positive experience, namely that of identifying with friends, some of whom were in a band with him. However, as the subject got older, he regretted having some of the tattoos because he thought they caused employers to discriminate against him.

"Our analyses revealed that identity is an ongoing negotiation between the individual who chooses to narrate particular scenes and the culture within which the individual lives," Murray said. "Redemption and contamination sequences as common story lines helped us better understand the long-term consequences of tattoos and their role in the negotiation process."

Murray says this process demonstrates the importance and power of narrative in the construction of personal identity, which, good or bad, says a lot about the types of products people purchase and their reasons for purchasing them. Many marketers and retailers understand this and increasingly rely on narrative to sell all kinds of products.

"Selling a product by listing its attributes is an old paradigm," Murray said. "Companies understand that identity and personal narrative are extremely effective tools for marketing products. They are valuable explanations for why and what people consume."

Murray's study, titled "Inscribing the Myth: the Role of Tattoos in Identification," was published in *Research in Consumer Behavior*, a journal presenting the latest research, theory and methods in the field of consumer behavior. A copy of the study can be provided upon request.

Source: University of Arkansas

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